

LADIES AND LONERS: A COMPARATIVE GENDER STUDY OF THE
ROMANCE AND POPULAR WESTERN

by

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ABSTRACT

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Despite the efforts of readers, writers and cultural critics, the fact remains that romance and the Western genres are considered low art. The real impetus behind this paper is not whether or not or even why they are considered low art. The important questions for me, the cultural critic, are: Why are these books so popular? What do they offer their readers? In considering their popular appeal, I think the implication of gender is the most illuminating piece of the puzzle. In this thesis, I will analyze the gender-specific fantasies offered in the Western romance novel and the popular Western, which will include characterizations of the hero and heroine in each of the novels, the employment of language, and perceptions of the genre, specifically efforts to legitimize them.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Context of the Project

Stuart Hall, in his article “The Meaning of New Times,” reveals the essence of cultural studies when he defines postmodernism as something that “[. . .] celebrates the penetration of aesthetics into everyday life and the ascendancy of popular culture over the High Arts” (227). One of the ramifications of this rise of low culture is that “[m]odern culture is relentlessly material in its practices and modes of production. [. . .] Young people, black and white, who can’t even spell ‘postmodernism’ but have grown up in the age of computer technology, rock videos and electronic music already inhabit such a universe in their heads” (233). Cultural studies involves the study of sub cultures, those on the margins of society. Specifically, and for the purposes of this paper, cultural studies involves examining culture with a little “c.” Seemingly, genres, such as the popular romance and the Western adhere to and perpetuate certain conventions and formulas that cause them to be thrust into the category of low art. The fact that these genres draw on certain conventions is not the sole reason they are eschewed as lowbrow. Certainly other genres, like the gothic novel, employ conventions, and though they have at times teetered on the edge of respectability, there are not many who would consider *Frankenstein* or *Turn of the Screw* low art. No, it seems that there must be

something more than a tendency to rely on archetypal codes to classify a genre as low art.

Since popular romance fiction claims approximately 55% of all mass-market fiction sold (*Romance Writers of America*) and popular Western novels by authors like Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour “sold hundreds of millions of copies” in the twentieth century (Tompkins 5), these two genres seemingly appeal to the masses; therefore, one can deduce that one of the primary reasons a genre becomes low is its popular consumption. That fact in itself is one that I have often marveled at in my foray into cultural studies. At the heart of cultural studies is the desire to question time-wearied aesthetics that represent only a few and relegate many to obscurity. It is a celebration of those forgotten. But even though we cultural critics are willing to ‘dirty’ our hands, we still stand at a distance. We appreciate them as only academics will—with quite a bit of analytical distance. They are cultural products. The little ‘c’.

Despite the efforts of readers, writers and cultural critics, the fact remains that romance and the Western genres are considered low art. The real impetus behind this paper is not whether or not or even why they are considered low art. The important questions for me, the cultural critic, are: Why are these books so popular? What do they offer their readers? In considering their popular appeal, I think the implication of gender is the most illuminating piece of the puzzle. The romance is written primarily by and for women (although there are male readers and writers), and the popular Western employs particular archetypal brands of masculinity. These books draw and keep their readership by offering types of gender-specific fantasies. In this thesis, I will analyze the gender-

specific fantasies offered in the Western romance novel and the popular Western, which will include characterizations of the hero and heroine in each of the novels, the employment of language, and perceptions of the genre, specifically efforts to legitimize them. Though I may reference many others, my focal texts for the romance genre are Johanna Lindsey's *Savage Thunder* and Joan Johnston's *Frontier Woman*. The Westerns are Louis L'Amour's *Hondo* and *Flint*.

1.2 Romance and the Popular Western

At this point, I think it is important to further explain the particular novels I am going to use to represent the fantasies I mentioned above. It would be reductive for me to lump the entire romance genre into one group because it contains many subgenres, and each of those subgenres offer their own unique fantasies. Romances may be contemporary or historical, part of a series or single titles. There are science fiction, fantasy and even paranormal romances. The historical subgenre is unique in that it can also be broken down even further into time periods such as the Anglo Saxon, Medieval, Edwardian, Georgian, Regency, and Victorian eras. Tales set in the vibrant, rugged landscape of the American West have their own place within the historical market and are particularly relevant for my project. In terms of the popular Western, the body of literature can seemingly be divided between the serious literary Western American novel as represented by authors such as Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Bret Harte, Willa Cather, A.B. Guthrie, Cormac McCarthy, and John Steinbeck and the popular Western novel represented by authors such as Louis L'Amour, Max Brand, Owen Wister, and Zane Grey (Pilkington xii). Since this paper is a comparison of popular fiction, I am

only interested in dealing with the latter category. This gender comparison will be particularly rich because these two genres will share the same localities and historical moments as well as many of the same conventions.

My perspective in this paper is a complex one. While I am attempting to keep intellectual distance, I am both analyst and reader of romance novels. I am a part of the readerdom that I critique, so there are elements of the autoethnography in this paper. I believe that my nineteen years of experience reading the genre coupled with my experience as a graduate student are particularly relevant to this project. These factors are certainly what sparked my interest in this topic. Interestingly (and certainly what is fascinating about the genre to me) many of the scholars who write about the romance novel offer caveats about their interest in them. They seem to have to explain that they are intelligent feminists who are completely adept at reading and analyzing ‘serious’ literature. They usually broach the subject in a tongue in cheek confessional manner, ruefully explaining that their colleagues, friends, and family have difficulty reconciling the smart, savvy critical thinker with the tawdry romance novelist. Julie Tetel Anderson, professor of Linguistics at Duke University and a romance novelist, recalls her mother’s reaction to her writing. Her mother thinks her writing career is “‘just a phase’” or that “‘Julie can’t be serious [about writing romance novels]. She’s too smart to be serious about this’” (Kaler 182). Although I do not read Westerns regularly, I have a personal connection to them as well because I was raised by a father completely devoted to them and their brand of stoic masculinity—a man who epitomizes the silent, enigmatic strength of the Western hero.

I realize that by categorizing these genres in terms of the gender-specific fantasies they offer I am treading on shifty and perhaps reductive ground. However, I am convinced that their popularity is uniquely tied to the types of fantasies they offer, and those fantasies are gender-related. Their readers crave them. The essential nature of the fantasy does not change, but readers return again and again. The key word, though, is fantasy. Although they contain elements of realism, they are not intended to be real or to mirror real life. I believe that they are pure escapism. The idea that they are to be taken as fantasy is a point of contention, particularly in the romance genre.

CHAPTER 2

PERCEPTION OF THE ROMANCE

2.1 Critical Reactions

Romance readers are subject to harsh condemnation for their reading choices. As Jayne Ann Krentz, editor of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of Romance*, points out:

Few people know how much courage it takes for a woman to open a romance novel on an airplane. [. . .] When it comes to romance novels, society has always felt free to sit in judgment not only on the literature, but on the reader herself. The verdict is always the same. [. . .] It labels the books as trash and the reader as unintelligent, uneducated, unsophisticated or neurotic. (1)

Krentz goes on to explain that most genre fiction is based on fantasy. You either enjoy the fantasy or you do not. Characters and plots may change, but the fantasies do not. People seem to accept this from science fiction, spy novels or even Westerns, but not in romance novels. A romance is considered formulaic and trite, but many types of fiction are formulaic, and as Julie Anderson points out:

The romance is neither more nor less formulaic than any other kind of fiction. [. . .] the happy ending is not a conclusion but a premise of the genre. [. . .] A love relationship is a fine and venerable topos. It is an

institutionalized something to write about, just as the Madonna and Child is an 'institutionalized something' to paint about. (183)

Anderson is just one of the many cultural critics who have explored the paradoxical tendency in academia to venerate the elite and esoteric over the approachable and consumable. The formulaic nature of the romance is not the only strike against it. The great, unrelenting fear of critics of the genre is that the women who read these novels will be unable to separate reality from fantasy.

In her dissertation, *But Are They Any Good? Women Readers, Formula Fiction, and Sacralization of the Literary Canon*, Beth Rapp Young shares a frighteningly funny anecdote about a presenter at the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Susan Kimoto, a presenter, brandished copies of Harlequin romance novels and warned the bemused audience about the insidious nature of the texts. She gave testimonials of friends who pined for the hero in the novels they read. A friend of hers, Kimoto says, insists that relationships have to be like they are in the novels. Kimoto herself even claims to have been “addicted” to them. At the climax of the anecdote, Kimoto warns the audience: “‘You’re probably close to or involved with somebody who reads these things—it could be your sister, wife or significant other’” (2). Kimoto’s comments, though humorous to me, also raised a serious concern in my mind. Her comments epitomize the paradox that sometimes exists within feminism that suggests that many women may not possibly have enough discernment to distinguish fiction from reality, that they must be saved from themselves or shown the light. Such assertions merely reinforce patriarchal notions of female fragility and mental weakness.

Other influential scholars who have written about romance fiction, such as Janice Radway and Tania Modleski, have suggested that the romance novel does offer a fantasy for the readers, but they are not the types of fantasies that most readers and writers of romance appreciate. Radway characterizes the Smithton women (the members of her study) as the quintessential domestic glue holding the family together, and at the same time, the doormat for its members to tread upon. They are seeking to escape the domestic drudgery in their lives, but she also insists that they return willingly and happily to their roles as wives and mothers. Radway suggests that this literature is ultimately a little dangerous for women because it merely provides them with a coping mechanism, but does not move them toward any real change. In her 1980 article, “A Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances,” Tania Modleski asserts that “the reader is encouraged to participate in and actively desire feminine self-betrayal” (435). *In Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*, she suggests that romance novels are a revenge fantasy that allows the oppressed readerdom to experience a catharsis through the humiliation of the hero. These types of fantasies are not the fantasies that I believe readers and writers of romance novels create or desire.

Romance novelists Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz suggest that romance novels draw heavily on “mythical traditions that reach from Ancient Greece to Celtic Britain to the American West” (Krentz 16). The language is highly figurative and “heavy-laden with familiar symbols, images, metaphors, and paradoxes [. . .]” (16). They go on to explain that “contained within [these familiar mythical codes] is a collection of subtle feminine voices, part myth, part fantasy, part reality, messages that

have been passed down from one generation of women to the next (16). The fantasies I will explain involve unity and comradeship among women that are informed by the idea of a collective voice that transcends time.

2.2 Critical History

Before I begin my analysis of the fantasies offered in these two genres, I want to briefly sketch some of the critical history of the romance genre. Since I am comparing these two genres specifically for their gendered implications, my work is informed by feminist theory and the varying responses within feminism to these books. For any cultural studies approach to romance reading, Janice A. Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* is a crucial place to start. Almost every critical article or book I have read about romance novels references or engages with her seminal work. She opened up the discourse on romance novels, and was perhaps, the first scholar to attempt to take them seriously, at least in terms of their value as cultural products. Although written in 1984, this book responds to many of the important debates in and around cultural studies. She raises the important questions to which we continue to offer answers: Why do women read these novels? What do these novels and their readers tell us about popular culture?

Though Radway sincerely tries to approach her group of study objectively, she is constantly at odds with her feminist sensibilities. Kathleen Seidel, a romance writer, in her article, "Judge Me Not by the Joy I Bring," refers to Radway's anecdotal recollection of her "trepidation about her scheduled meeting with a romance bookseller who had promised to identify herself by wearing a lavender pantsuit [. . .] she [Radway]

is astonished at how readily she liked the bookseller, a warm, magnanimous, open-hearted woman” (Krentz 171-2). Radway was clearly trying to come to terms with the old stereotype of the typical romance reader as a frowsy, uneducated housewife who curls up on her couch watching soaps, reading romance novels and eating chips. (As my own mother was a stay-at-home-mom, I often wondered: Who are these women people talk about? My mother worked from morning until night.) Seidel goes on to explain:

With our interest in the personal, romance writers often transcend barriers that separate others. I have a long and expensive education behind me. Some of my readers do too; others do not. My closest friend in the romance community is a high school graduate. We are all women; we can talk to one another. (172)

Radway’s interpretation of the group of Smithton women’s romance readings leaves the distinct impression that she considers this activity anti-feminist. Although Radway does not focus on the texts themselves, she still connects the act of reading with the text because it is the content of the novels that provide the women with escape into a world that she finds subversive to feminism. She writes: “Passivity is at the heart of the romance experience in the sense that the final goal of each narrative is the creation of that perfect union where the ideal male, who is masculine and strong yet nurturant too, finally recognizes the intrinsic worth of the heroine” (97). Although she situates the act of reading the romance within the context of resistance in hidden pleasures, ultimately Radway opines that romances are ways to compensate for oppression of the patriarchy, and that they do actually reinforce patriarchal structures. The problem many feminist

writers and readers of romance have with feminist critique of romances is what Seidel terms the “‘us/them’ distinction” (Krentz 172). She writes:

Feminists talk about sisterhood; I do not know how deeply they feel it. The undercurrent throughout feminist criticism of romances is that these scholars and critics know what is right for other women [. . .] In a doctoral dissertation of which I have unfortunately seen only the introduction and the first chapter, Deborah K. Chappel carefully traces the scholarly studies of romances and finds in all the work, however sympathetic the authors hope to be, a strong sense of the reader as Other, as someone less enlightened, less analytic—more likely to wear a lavender pantsuit—than the critic. They, those scholars, aren’t like you and me, and they’re mighty glad of it. Nonetheless, they know what you and I should be doing with our lives. (172)

The answers to the question of whether or not romance novels and feminism are mutually exclusive have been varied and multi-faceted, but among most feminist scholars, the answer seems to be a resounding yes. There are other critics who represent what I call the feminist backlash in relation to the romance novel such as Tania Modleski and Anne Snitow (there are many others). These critics posit that the romance novel as representation of the real, material woman is a much less important component for study than the romance as affirmation of the patriarchy and antithesis to feminism.

In Ann Barr Snitow’s 1979 article, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” she asserts that Harlequin romances are pornography and should

only be understood in that context. She writes: “How different is the pornography, in which sex is bathed in romance, diffused, always implied rather than enacted at all! This pornography is the Harlequin romance” (195). Snitow is intent on discrediting and disempowering the genre. She explains away the incongruous and problematic aspects of the novels as a consequence of pornographic influence.

CHAPTER 3

FEMINISM

3.1 Gender Theory

Interestingly, all of these women, from Radway to the high-school-educated reader of romances, see themselves as feminists. As Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (the editors of *Feminisms: An Anthology of Feminist Theory and Criticism*) remind us, feminism itself is not and should not be a monolithic category (ix). It is possible to be a part of the same movement and have such vastly different ideas of how and to what ends it should move. As Seidel already pointed out, some readers and writers are highly educated, others are not, so we have a mixing of the popular feminist movement with the academic one. For the feminist readers and writers of romance fiction, the rallying point is their gender, and as feminist gender theorist, Judith Butler has taught us, gender is a complex concept, one fraught with concerns about essentialism and biological determinism. Part of the impetus for Butler's project is her concern for what she terms the compulsory heterosexuality pervasive in feminist theory. Even though she has said that she considers herself a feminist first, her work in *Gender Trouble* is considered foundational for queer theory. Butler is interested in disrupting, perhaps obliterating, attachments to the male/female binary in order to reconsider what constitutes intelligible bodies. As I have already mentioned, the world of romance

focuses on the unity of the feminine, so romances are seemingly in tension with Butler's ideas. Romance writers and readers presuppose a commonality among women, and they write about it. They offer fantasies that rely on that shared common ground that Butler resists. Butler goes beyond the typical conception of the gender-as-cultural-enactment-on-sexed-bodies theory to suggest that the sexed body itself is a site of construction, that "nature" itself is a contested ground. But Butler has her critics in the academic world, and her fiercest ones lambaste her precisely on this issue of materiality of the body, especially how it relates to politics and "the real material conditions of women" (Breen 31). The reason Butler faces charges of theoretical detachment is because she seeks to dismantle the markers that delimit the identity that binds and organizes political action. A question I pose is: What does feminist theory/praxis entail if the category of woman/femininity has no binding features? Or, is it as Butler suggests that these binding features are just euphemisms for essentialist notions? One of the most divisive issues in feminist theory is the hotly contested debate between what is referred to as essentialism and anti-essentialism (social construction). The debate raged through feminist theory in the 1980s and 90s and has by no means been settled (as if it ever could be) in the new millennium. Instead, essentialism (especially biological determinism), which is and has been considered by many to be completely corrosive and insidious, the pariah of feminist critical theory, has been reconsidered in terms of questions of science, materiality and corporeality. On the other hand, Luce Irigaray, whose work Butler engages, deals primarily with material sexual difference. Irigaray focuses on reclaiming woman from Western metaphysical nothingness. Irigaray's

concept of what constitutes woman is most blatantly expressed in her poetic writing in *This Sex Which Is Not One* titled, “When Our Lips Speak Together.” It is firmly grounded in the ‘essential’ or ‘natural’ genitalia of the sexed body. She explains that “by our lips we are women,” but she just as clearly explains what we are not: “We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plentitude, fulfillment from the other” (209). If, as Irigaray says, “we are the women from the start,” the delineations of intelligibility of which Butler’s work speaks are fixed firmly in the male/female binary.

Part of what makes Irigaray’s ideas hard to pinpoint is her use of language. She is committed to what she calls a feminine language within a feminine imaginary that is fluid, formless, and poetic. Irigaray seeks a new language for the feminine that would be unintelligible to men because she does not seek to work within the phallic economy, and she does not intend to merely exchange male power for female power, but seemingly wants to position a feminine space that is outside of a the phallic economy. Even though Irigaray is classified (if these classifications mean anything at all) as an essentialist, her concepts of the political implications and the practice of her theories is a little nebulous. What is this feminine language? How do I speak it? Is Irigaray speaking it? How will we know on any kind of practical level when we are outside patriarchy, and will the men know it? According to Irigaray, for women to escape the patriarchy, they have to sequester themselves from men. She writes:

Would it not involve a new prison, a new cloister, built of their own accord? For women to undertake tactical strikes, to keep themselves apart from men long enough to learn to defend their desire [. . .] to discover the love of other women while sheltered

from men's imperious choices that put them in the position of rival commodities [. . .].
(Irigaray 33)

For Irigaray's scheme to succeed, sexual difference must be preserved, but if we think in terms of Butler, why is the body the place of contested power? Why does the body constitute the difference that offers subjectivity?

Both Butler and Irigaray have incited criticism for their ideological extremes. Butler tends to lose sight of the body, whereas Irigaray is tenaciously attached to it. Their philosophical grounding lends their work an abstracted quality that, according to some of their critics, could possibly lodge them too firmly in the academy, isolated from 'real' women. These real women and men are the focus of the romance and the popular Western. Both the romance and the Western call Butler's ideas into question. Their success relies on the fact that they offer gender-specific fantasies that require the writers and readers to immerse themselves in a carefully constructed world that operates within certain conventions.

Interestingly enough, many romance novelists, when describing their philosophy of creating and writing, draw on Irigarayan notions of writing across the body. Krentz and Barlow, in their article, "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," elaborate on language and codes that resonate with women. They suggest that, "in order to understand the appeal of romance fiction, one must be sensitive to the subtle codes, contained in figurative language and in plot, that point toward an uniquely feminist sharing of common emotional and intellectual heritage" (27). Dawn Heineken, in her article, "Changing Ideologies in Romance Fiction," tries to explain

the evolution of the conventions of romance novels since the 1970s, suggesting that they now portray sex in more Irigarayan terms, which would portray an “‘erotic’ scene based on Irigaray’s notion of the eternally dialogic, eternally connected female body, [and it would be] conceived of as diffused, less goal-oriented, and more context driven” (Kaler 167). Although some authors embrace Irigarayan notions of the feminine in terms of escape from phallic sexual descriptions in romances, Irigaray’s philosophy does not necessarily embody the feminist sensibilities in the romance any more than do Butler’s. Though the women celebrate and rally around femininity, the purpose is not to isolate from masculinity—quite the contrary. The romance is about union between the two. Romance novels usually involve heterosexual unions, but romance novels I have read offer favorable treatment of homosexuality. Primarily, it is the heroine who is closely connected with and protective of a male homosexual character.

My romance experience is primarily with the historical romance, and their treatment of gender and sexual orientation is different from the contemporary romance because they, in order to offer that aspect of historical reality that its readers crave, have characters who generally operate within the cultural conventions of the time period. What this typically means is that most of the characters, including the hero, will espouse conventional and many times patriarchal notions. However, as the hero moves through his journey of enlightenment, he becomes astonishingly progressive. Many times, the hero and the heroine already embodied these progressive tendencies from the beginning. That fact is what makes them heroic.

In Johanna Lindsey's medieval tale, *Defy Not the Heart*, Reina, the heroine, has a young, gay, male personal servant named Theodric. Reina sees Theo as more than a servant. He is her confidant and friend. He performs the duties of a lady's maid, but he does so secretly while her father was alive because medieval society was not willing to allow a male to assist a young, virtuous lady with the intimate duties of a lady's maid, despite the fact that the whole castle is aware of Theo's preferences. Interestingly, Lindsey's treatment of homosexuality is historically consistent, if according to Foucault, homosexuality did not become an identity until the late eighteenth century. The characters in Lindsey's tale engage in homosexual acts, but are not labeled as "homosexual." Theo has many affairs with the men-at-arms in the castle who are also involved with women. Once her father has died, and she takes over the running of the castle with the help of her father's trusted vassals, she openly allows Theo to serve her.

The hero, on the other hand, reacts in true twentieth-century homophobic fashion. (This novel was written in 1989.) He is disgusted. When Theo makes advances at him, Ranulf becomes enraged, threatening him with bodily harm. But this hero has many things to learn on his journey of enlightenment. He not only must become sensitive to the needs of the heroine, accepting her intelligence and her position as equal in their marriage, but he must also accept Theo's presence in her private chamber and as the caretaker of their son. In the final pages of the book, Ranulf still has not overcome his dislike for Theo, but Reina is not finished trying to get through to him. When Ranulf argues that he "will not have Guy [his son] influenced!" (Lindsey 409), Reina does not accept that excuse. She cuts him off, insisting that Theo is more than capable. She

argues: “As for Theo, he has lived here his whole life and had the care of two babies and three children, myself included, and I might add that I was the only female he attended. He has not influenced any of us adversely, nor is he ever like to” (409-10). Ranulf has not completed his transformation to sensitive male, but when Reina “saw he was actually listening to her and no longer frowning so fiercely” (410), we feel certain that he will in the days that follow the end of the book. Although romances sometimes treat homosexuality favorably, I think both mainstream romances and popular Westerns will remain largely heterosexual fantasies.

3.2 Evolution of Heterosexual Unions

The romance novel has evolved in its treatment of heterosexual unions since their inception in the 1970s. In fact, much of the critical treatment of romance novels, specifically Radway’s 1984 study, comes from the analysis of the early novels of the 1970s and 80s. These novels sometimes featured what have been termed ‘rape fantasies.’ It began with authors like Kathleen Woodiwiss and Rosemary Rogers. These romances “were sometimes labeled ‘bodice rippers’ not without certain justification since many of them contained narrow-eyed heroes who smoked thin cheroots, were perpetually sardonic, and committed some rather violent sex acts on the heroines” (Krentz 53). Many novelists are put on the defensive about this, insisting that romances have changed and now offer enlightened heroes who would never harm the heroine. Whether readers and writers want to accept it or not, those bodice rippers started the romance industry. Those “‘sweet savage romances’ featured spirited heroines fighting tooth and nail but constantly being ravished—in both senses of the word—by

handsome, virile, often angry men who finally repent of their sins and settle down to wedded bliss” (69), and they were wildly popular.

There have been many theories as to why romances started with this particular fantasy. One of the most often touted is that modern society would not accept premarital sex from the virtuous heroine without force. My feminist hackles rise with this assertion because it dangerously and erroneously entangles sex with violence and most certainly reinforces the age-old notion that women who have sex or are promiscuous are bad. Certainly, in many of the historical settings that idea was pervasive, but to suggest that the modern reader could not deal with sexually experienced heroines rankles. Nevertheless, I read novels with what are sometimes called alpha males, and I was intrigued. I began to consume them with all the stereotypical rapidity assigned to housewives with time to kill except that I was a teenager, and I was not even alive when Woodiwiss wrote her debut novel, *The Flame and the Flower*, in 1972.

There are many possible reasons why I read and enjoyed these early novels. I was young, high school age, so my life experience was limited. I certainly had not read any Butler or Sedgwick. I was, however, raised by a strong mother and a progressive father who pushed both my sister, Paige, and myself to get our degrees first and our families later. That we were every bit the intellectual equals of men (boys?), we never questioned.

Many other writers and readers of romance have had similar experiences. Although we understand and rejoice in the fact that these types of romances are rightfully outdated, we, educated, enlightened and empowered women, read and

continue to read them. Why? Linda Barlow, a romance author, explains how she, despite her “feminist qualms,” is

not ashamed to admit that [she has] always been one of those die-hard fans of the old-fashioned, hard-edged romances which feature a feisty heroine who falls into love and conflict with a dangerous hero with sardonic eyebrows and a cruel but sensual mouth. In the romances [she] most enjoys, as well as the ones [she] writes, the intensity of excitement [she] feels while reading is directly proportional to the level of emotional hazard the heroine experiences as her relationship with the hero develops. (Krentz 45)

She goes on to explain that she loves ‘serious literature.’ She went to graduate school and was a lecturer at Boston College before she became a novelist. She writes:

When I first switched careers, I used to feel vaguely guilty that my time, which ought to be spent in the serious study of Shakespeare, Austen, Virginia Woolf, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, was now committed to the creation of pulse-pounding works of popular women’s fiction that rework the most ancient myths about the relations of men and women. (46)

Many women see this literature as a celebration of women from all walks of life. They believe that these books allow the voices of women to be heard and venerate their experiences and contributions. They also do not see any real conflict with the novels

and their identity as feminists. Susan Philips, another successful, college-educated author, explains that in the late 1970s, she and her neighborhood friend read romances

[d]espite the fact that we were the two most outspoken feminists in the neighborhood. College educated, opinionated, and aggressive, we sniffed out male chauvinism in everyday life like ever-zealous bloodhounds. God help any unsuspecting male who called out ‘Hello girls!’ when we took our evening walks. We worried about women who didn’t take command of their lives. We voted for political candidates who championed women’s rights. And we made our husbands’ lives miserable if they didn’t display the proper amount of gratitude for the fact that we put our professional lives on hold to raise their children. (54)

Philips goes on to explain that she and her friend did not feel a conflict between the books they read and their feminist views. For the most part, if they ever did find any discrepancies, they chalked it up to the idea that “‘fiction is fiction and real life is real life’” (54). As I have mentioned before, many feminist critics have insulted their sisters by suggesting that the mindless masses of women reading these books cannot tell the difference between real life and the fantasy of a fiction book. Nevertheless, the fantasy seemingly did evolve with the feminist movement, and we readers were pleased to see a still-feisty heroine take on a hero who drew the line at physically harming her.

CHAPTER 4

THE HERO AND THE HEROINE

An integral part of the fantasies offered in the romance and the Western are the characterizations of the heroine and hero. The interesting aspect of the romance is that the heroine and the hero are equally important to the story. In the Western, that is not the case. The focus is entirely on the hero, and the female characters are usually relegated to being the “love interest” of the hero (Krentz 137). The two heroines of my focus texts, Cricket Stewart in *Frontier Woman* and Jocelyn “the Duchess” Fleming in *Savage Thunder*, offer two variations of the American West romance heroine. Cricket Stewart is the youngest of three young ladies who are raised by a father who wanted all sons and raises them as such despite the fact that they are daughters. Cricket is the daughter of Rip Stewart’s heart, and he has taught her all the necessary skills for a man running a sprawling, 1840s Texas plantation. She “possessed all the skills necessary to survive on the Texas frontier without the aid of another living soul” (Johnston 1). She dresses and swears like a man, disdaining dresses and the married state in general because she realizes that with marriage comes the loss of her independence. Cricket wants desperately to be the son Rip wants, and she is because “[s]he could ride like the wind. She could break a wild bronc and track better than an Indian” (31), so Cricket eschews all things that are considered appropriate for her gender. She realizes that by

rejecting petticoats and donning buckskin breeches and boots, she has alienated herself from society. By flaunting society's conventions, she has ostracized herself, and she seemingly revels in her independent, albeit solitary life. Even her sisters, who, to varying degrees try to be the sons Rip wants, do not go to the extremes that Cricket does. Both of her older sisters, Sloan and Bayleigh, want to marry eventually. Cricket is deeply distrustful of people, especially anyone outside of her family. Because gender roles rigidly segregate society, she does not fit in the worlds of either sex; consequently, she always has something to prove and is always defensive. It is this feisty, hard-edged grit that attracts the hero, Texas Ranger Jarrett Creed. He alternately marvels at and disapproves of her unconventional behavior.

In many historical romances, the heroines are refusing to accept the confines of their prescribed gender roles. That refusal manifests itself in the heroine performing male tasks, wearing male clothing, and rejecting typically-feminine accomplishments. Cricket attends a *fandango* celebration at a neighboring plantation, and is forced by her father to attend dressed as a lady. Her only dress is girlish and outdated, and her actual physical discomfort in the dress symbolizes her insecurity about her femininity. She has to face the gathering of her social peers on what she considers unequal footing. Cricket feels her lack keenly.

Cricket glanced anxiously at the elegantly dressed men and women. [. . .] [She] looked down at her ill-fitting linen dress and then at the fashionable gowns of the other women. It wasn't that she cared what

they thought, but she dreaded the looks she knew were coming and hated having to make small talk when she had nothing to say to them. (107)

If she were dressed in her usual manner, she would exude cool confidence. In fact, she cannot wait to “shuck [her] outfit as soon as [she] could and put on [her] buckskins for the *dias de toros*” (106). She plans on entering the bronc riding contest, and she looks forward to once again feeling comfortable and in control. It is not that Cricket is uncomfortable with the fact that her male dress and manner ostracize her from the company of the other genteel ladies. What humiliates her in this moment, at the party, is that she has to face the women on their own turf—the world of prescribed femininity. She knows she is lacking in this area. She knows that if she aligns herself with female gentility, then she must abide by its rules, which for her would include marriage. In Cricket’s mind, her only other alternative is to sever all connections with femininity by adopting the dress, manner and persona of a male. She has chosen to inhabit the male world because in her society, it seems as if only men have power, but it is that very notion that the heroine wants to combat by learning and excelling at skills considered to be men’s.

Typically, in most historical romances, the heroine has some position of authority unusual to a woman. She is usually wealthy, so there are people dependent on her or her family. In Cricket’s case, the male ranch hands or *vaqueros* respect her talents and take orders from her. Initially, that may have been because she is the boss’s daughter, but eventually, they appreciate her for her own merits. This convention in romances allows the historical romance heroine to establish herself as a spirited,

intelligent woman who refuses to accept limitations, one who wants to break boundaries and assert herself. She champions the rights of women, and the readers cheer her on. This particular convention is not unique to the Western romance. It occurs in many other historicals, but since the American West is a rugged, survival-of-the-fittest environment, many of these frontier romances offer this type of heroine. This convention also allows for an even more heroic hero because he appreciates the uniqueness and unconventionality of the heroine, but most importantly, it shows his progressive attitude toward women. The hero does not always appreciate her feminist principles in the beginning, but that transformation is all part of what I refer to as his journey of enlightenment.

Cricket's tough-as-nails persona is particularly fitting for the Western romance because the West itself represents a lack of civility. The people it breeds are survivors. They are committed to and connected with their environment. Cricket has raised and trained wolves and keeps them as pets, but these animals still have an aura of danger surrounding them, just as both she and Jarrett Creed do. The wolves are obedient and dedicated to her (one of them actually dies trying to save her), but they are also unpredictable, still feral. These wolves are symbolic of what is heroic in Cricket and Jarrett Creed (the hero).

When Cricket and Jarrett meet for the first time, they are both in their own element—the dangerous Texas plains, specifically, Comanche country. Cricket is out hunting for the family's dinner with her older sister, Bay, who according to Cricket, “simply had too soft a heart for killing,” but Cricket does not see that as a positive

quality. Cricket has compassion, so she kills quickly and cleanly, so that the animal does not suffer (Johnston 5). She follows her own rigid code, and though she loves her sister, she sees her softness as a weakness. Thus, the hero must be equally tough and savvy in the wilderness, or he could not attract the heroine. When they meet, Cricket is chasing after a wounded stag that Bay failed to kill with the first shot, and she comes upon a scene in which her wolves have surrounded Creed in a pond, who is fighting them off with a club. The fight that ensues includes Cricket threatening him with a bow and arrow, tossing him over her shoulder with an impressive wrestling move, and brandishing a knife when he tries to pin her to the ground (14). One of the important things for the success of any romance is that the hero is worthy of the heroine. In historicals, such as the Western, physical strength and agility is a prized and necessary attribute.

In most of the Western romances, the hero is physically stronger, often dangerous. Physically, he can best her, but he appreciates her physical prowess though it usually takes him by surprise. Jarrett is no exception. He is strong, rugged, and Cricket is immediately appreciative of his physique because it is indicative of his ability to survive. When she confronts him she immediately notices his body.

Hip deep in the middle of the shallow pond, lowered club still held in readiness by powerful hands, stood the most proudly handsome man Cricket had ever seen [. . .] She'd never imagined a body could threaten so much strength, yet be so pleasing to gaze upon. (9)

For Cricket, the attraction lies in the evidence of his physical prowess, which is directly related to his ability to survive and perhaps to protect. In historical romances, writers do not shy away from the focus on the importance of male strength and power. In a Western romance, quick reflexes, knowledge of the terrain and environment, cunning (perhaps more than just intellect), skill with weapons and physical strength are necessary for survival, and these attributes make the heroes attractive to the heroine. Pamela Marks, in her article, “The Good Provider in Romance Novels,” addresses the idea that part of the success of the romance is that they focus on “the heroine’s—and by extension the reader’s—desire for a protector who will shield her from the slings and arrows of the struggles of everyday life” (Kaler 11). Cricket senses immediately that Jarrett Creed is someone who is capable of taking care of himself, and that fact qualifies him as a good provider. Cricket would not be attracted to a man who would not be able to survive in the wilderness and protect her as well. While this may be reinforcing a gender stereotype that men must be strong to be desirable, it is merely reinforcing a norm of a certain historical moment and locale. In the West, the ability to survive ranks high on the list of positive qualities for both men and women. For this reason, historical romances are tricky when analyzing them in terms of whether or not they are reductive.

For the contemporary romance novel, there are other things that constitute a desirable partner. Marks, who teaches American literature at the University of Rhode Island, and who had never read romances until she wrote this article, explains that the good provider

has a passionate concern for her [the heroine's] well being, whether it be economic or psychological [. . .] The good provider's primary function is as a reliever and preventer of the kind of stress that comes from living in a world fraught with assaults on a woman's desire for a quiet, peaceful, and secure life. (12)

The connotations associated with the label "good provider" might give most feminists pause. It seems as if Marks is suggesting that women who read romances are desiring and seeking protection from men, but Marks goes on to explain that in most contemporary romances, the heroines are also good providers and that:

The central idea of any romance novel is less that of reinterpretation of patriarchy than of *human connection*: [emphasis Marks'] of the search by honest women and men for a lifelong partner with whom to share the joys and sorrows, the work and leisure, the bitter and sweet of life. (19)

What is interesting about Western romances featuring the tough, no-nonsense heroines like Cricket, is that she initially desires Creed because of his physical strength, but learns to appreciate his tenderness toward her and his desire to nurture and protect her emotionally.

This Darwinian archetype is present in both the Western romance and the popular Western. The heroes and heroines of these books have to know or learn how to survive in the face of dangers that are both natural and man-made. As I have already mentioned, in the Western romance, the hero and heroine are equally important to the story and to the readers. In fact, as I will discuss later, some argue that the success of

the novel depends upon the characterization of the hero. However, in the Western, that equality between the male and female characters does not exist. The hero is the most important character; in fact, the women in the Western are usually peripheral, incidental or fairly one-dimensional. The Western is an affirmation of rugged male individualism. In her influential book, *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins analyzes the conventions of popular Western movies and books. As with the romance,

[t]he qualities required of the protagonist are qualities required to complete an excruciatingly difficult task: self-discipline, unswerving purpose; the exercise of knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and excellent judgment; and a capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds. (12)

The only difference is that, in the Western, the protagonist is almost always male. Like the romance, these novels are intended to be fantasy, to offer an escape, but interestingly, Tompkins explains that it is a serious fantasy. She asserts that:

At the most literal level, then, the experience the scene reproduces for its readers is that of work rather than leisure, of effort rather than rest or relaxation. [. . .] Hard work is transformed here from the necessity one wants to escape into the most desirable of human endeavors: action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs the mind, and directs one's life to the service of an unquestioned goal. (12)

In the opening scene of Louis L'Amour's Western, *Hondo*, readers are treated to the intensity of purpose present in the main character, Hondo Lane. His intent, like many

other Western heroes, is to survive using cunning, bravery, and perhaps a little luck. He is adept at sensing the clues of his environment. As he notes the extraneous dust on the trail, he cleverly deduces that “[d]ust meant a dust devil or riders...and this had been no dust devil” (223). He carefully considers the possibilities: “If they were white men fearful of attack, they were now holed up in some arroyo. If they were Apaches, they would be trying to close in” (223). Hondo assesses the situation at a glance, as he will do many times throughout the book. He is always able to figure who or what poses the bigger threat and prepare for it. In Westerns and the Western romance, the American Indian (as I will explore in more detail later) is characterized paradoxically—with a mixture of awe and contempt, which I suppose is precisely what the authors are trying to suggest were the actual perceptions of society during this time period. On the first page of *Hondo*, Lane is described as, “a big man, wide-shouldered, with the lean, hard-boned face of the desert rider. There was no softness in him. His toughness was ingrained and deep, without cruelty, yet quick, hard, and dangerous” (223). In L’Amour’s, *Flint*, the main character, by the second page of the book, is described as “a straw-haired man with a mean and dangerous look, like a wolf among sheep” (2). In the Western, to be heroic, a man has to be tough, taciturn, and when necessary, lethal.

The romance Western hero is also characterized that way, but traditionally, the stoic, emotional ineptitude wears off as the heroine schools him in the finer points of relationships and emotional availability. (Side note: it is not always the hero who has intimacy issues. Cricket Stewart is as fearful of emotional vulnerability as many Western heroes.) In Johanna Lindsey’s, romance, *Savage Thunder*, Colt Thunder, the

hero who is half white and half Cheyenne Indian, is equally fierce and dangerous, but like the other heroes, he is a survivor. He is a character, like Flint and Hondo, who is not soft. At the beginning of the novel, Colt is being whipped brutally by a sadistic ranch hand because he dared to presume to court the Boss's white daughter. Colt had not divulged his Indian heritage when he began courting her, but when it is revealed, Colt is to be tortured with a horse whip. The man whipping Colt, Ramsey Pratt,

derived a good deal of pleasure in it [whipping a man to death] Callan [the enraged father] had suggested a shorter, thinner horsewhip, still capable of making mincemeat of a man's back, but taking much longer to do it. [. . .] So far he [Ramsey Pratt] was just playing with the victim, using the same cracking technique he used with the bullwhip, slicing an inch here, an inch there, not really doing damage but making each little cut felt. (Lindsey 1-2)

In this case, the hero is not only capable of enduring excruciating pain, but he also exerts superhuman control over himself by not visibly or audibly reacting to the pain, which, in doing so, would satisfy his tormentors. As Colt is receiving over sixty lashes of the whip, he refuses to give in to the pain, but we readers know "[t]he screams were there, in his head, in his throat, just waiting to escape if he opened his mouth. He'd bite his tongue off before he let them out" (10). The other men watching the scene are shocked at his fortitude: "There were exclamations of amazement that he was still on his feet, a debate on whether it was possible to faint without keeling over [. . .] 'Wouldn't believe it if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes,' someone said next to him"

(10). A Western hero endures what the ordinary man cannot. For romance readers, he symbolizes a mythical creation, a man who female readers neither need nor necessarily desire in real life, but completely embrace in fantasy. For Western readers, this hero is ideal manhood, something the reader, perhaps all men, should aspire to. Jane Tompkins explains:

What is most interesting about Westerns at this moment in history is their relation to gender, and especially the way they created a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century. The model was not for women but for men: Westerns insist on this point by emphasizing the importance of manhood as an ideal. It is not one ideal among many, it is *the* ideal, certainly the one worth dying for. (17-18)

Interestingly, in the romance, female readers seem to separate more decisively the fantasy and reality. Doreen Malek, in her article, "Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know," discusses the importance of the fantasy of the "strong, dominant, aggressive male brought to the point of surrender by a woman" (74) for the success of a romance novel. She goes on to explain that, "[w]inning against a wimp is no triumph, but bringing Linda Howard's John Rafferty or Elizabeth Lowell's Cord Elliott [romance heroes] to heel? Now there's a victory." (75). What she then goes on to suggest about female readers' requirements for real-life companions as opposed to romance heroes made me realize how truly mythic and fantastic these characters are. She writes: "We [female romance readers and writers] may want a caring, sensitive modern man in our lives, but we want a swaggering, rough-hewn, mythic man in our books" (75). Despite the many

critics who fear that the romance reader is unable to distinguish between fact and reality, the romance readerdom desires and expects these larger-than-life, archetypal heroes.

Despite the fact that the readerdom expects archetypal heroes, romance writers must still deal with how to characterize the hero without reinforcing tired, socially constructed patriarchal versions of masculinity and still provide the fantasy their readerdoms want. According to the dialogue in the industry among writers, readers, and critics, it has been a long and difficult journey—one that is not nearly settled. The only thing that has been settled, if settled is the appropriate word, is that writers create a fantasy with the hero—whether or not this fantasy is damaging to feminist principles and/or reinforcing unrealistic constructions of manhood is the question that remains, and in my mind, remains unsolvable. It is also a fantasy that is vastly appealing to many women who come from varying walks of life with varying levels of education and political consciousnesses. Nevertheless, many writers and social critics have engaged the issue of constructions of the hero.

Abby Zidle, a doctoral student at the University of California, probes the idea of the changing nature of the hero. In her article, “From Bodice Ripper to Baby-Sitter: The New Hero in Mass-Market Romance,” she traces notions of ideal manhood from the 1960s-1990s and characterizes them as: 1. the playboy who, like Donald Trump, “certainly desires women (‘covets’ might be a more accurate term), but his interest is sexual and not particularly individual,” and 2. the mythopoetic man, “such as the participants in the recently formed ‘hairy male’ men’s groups, is not as openly

contemptuous of women as the playboy, but is still totally focused on male-male bonds, particularly a father figure” (Kaler 23). At the beginning of her article, Zidle offers a scenario from a romance book portraying a love scene between the hero and the heroine where the heroine’s “heart pounded” as “Carlo’s manly hands spanned her waist” (23). Then Zidle flashes to the stereo-typical romance reader who “looks up from her romance at her husband, John, who sits in the La-z-Boy scratching himself. With a wistful sigh, she returns to Amber’s [the heroine’s] adventures” (23). Zidle describes this as the “typical portrait of the romance reader for many years” (23). As I mentioned earlier, Radway opined that women use romance novels as a way to escape the drudgery of their every day lives. But as many writers, readers and critics have done after Radway’s ground-breaking work, Zidle questions the notion that “women who read romance [are] seeking a vicarious existence to brighten their drab, unromantic lives” (23). In fact, she also questions whether or not “women really want their husbands to be like ‘Carlo,’ eternally passionate and mysterious” (23). That particular misconception is one that many writers and readers have tried to correct. Doreen Owens Malek, a lawyer/romance novelist, in her article, “Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know,” celebrates the tough hero, pointing out that he is a fantasy, not a desired reality, one that she enjoys writing and reading about. She jokingly refers to the fact that her husband (also a lawyer) often teases her about the fact that if “he once behaved the way the heroes do in [Doreen’s] books [she] would serve him with separation papers the same day” (Krentz 79). Interestingly enough, Doreen agrees with her husband. Her words, in my opinion sum up why women are interested in the dark and dangerous hero. She writes:

[. . .] for better or worse, [we] are inhabiting reality. In reality, the water pump breaks and the water line freezes and your five-year-old develops strep throat on Christmas Eve. In reality, your client is a jerk and the judge hates your face and your opposition is a pin-striped hockey jock from Harvard. Is it so shocking that we might want to escape reality for a few hours with a book? During this time, we can have a glorious adventure with Shanna or Scarlet or whatever name Spunky Susie is wearing this week, taking on the bitchin'est, kickin'est, mucho macho guy on the block. The kids, the cramps, the mortgage, and the job will all be there when we put the book down and come back. (79)

What is important about Malek's words is that she dispels many myths about romance readers quickly. She is completely satisfied with her life, with her romance with her husband, and she does not use romance novels as a way to replace intimacy and lived experience. This woman, and many of her sisters who are reading and writing romances, are out there living and functioning, some in very high capacities in the real world. Some women have high-powered jobs, making their way in 'a man's world,' some are stay-at-home moms, some are scholars or writers, but all of these women are living life. For the majority of readers, the romance does not become a surrogate life experience. It is an escapist fantasy that women intentionally engage in, knowing that returning to their real lives is necessary and desired. As I mentioned earlier, Radway also noted that the Smithton women in her study willingly returned to their lives as wives and mothers, but the difference in what Malek is suggesting is that women do not

use the fantasy as a replacement for their own desires and ambitions. Women readers do not allow society to walk on them because, hey, at least they have their books. Women are doing. We can no longer dismiss readers and writers of romances as housewives with pathetic lives. The very notion that the life of a housewife is pathetic, or that these said housewives are in need of a surrogate life through romance fiction is presumptuous and offensive anyway, and it is not very supportive of sisterhood.

Zidle, who approaches romances from the view of a scholar, characterizes the matter of Carlo and masculinity differently. She says that

[m]ost readers recognize the romance hero as a *construction*, one that reflects contemporary ideas of masculinity more than any woman's ideal man. The New Hero draws from ideas of masculinity already available in our culture, but modifies them to make him a woman's fantasy, rather than that of a man. (Kaler 23)

Zidle's point is that the new mass-market romance hero (one created after 1990) is a purely female construction though it draws on notions of manhood already constructed and present in the culture. I think that she suggests that by shaping the masculinity of the heroes to reflect conventional men and then adding the ability for the hero to engage in a specific feminine fantasy, such as the male-female bond, writers are creating a new hero that is much more palatable to readers and critics. Her point is an interesting one, and certainly, many modern romances feature the sensitive, yet strong hero, but even the notorious heroes of the 1970s-1980s novels reflect elements of this combined, female-fantasy hero. In fact, studying the Western has reinforced this notion to me

because in the Western, the men do not deviate from their brand of prescribed masculinity. The female character is still only a love interest, and there is not a focus on the hero's building emotional connection to the main female character. It remains what it is—a particular type of male fantasy. Even the infamous Ruark, Kathleen Woodiwiss's 1977 dangerous alpha male, sheds some of his predatory nature and begins to desire emotional connectedness with Shanna. On page 495 of 534, after a long, torturous and often violent 'courting,' Ruark declares:

'I love you, Shanna. I want you to share my life and that which belongs to me. I want to build you a mansion, as your father did for your mother, as my parents did here. I want to give you children, with dark hair and light, and watch them grow, bathed in our love.' (495)

These are exclamations of the soul that would be difficult, if not impossible, to find in the Western.

As I have already mentioned, contemporary romance novels have much more freedom to incorporate a sensitive, feminist hero. In the historical romance, however, this territory is much harder to negotiate. The hero is progressive for his time, but it is a fine line to tread to keep him believable to the reader. Despite the fact that romances are fantasy, historical romance readers desire an element of reality. Zidle insists that the New Hero in romance novels published after 1990 evinces a transformation from sulky bad boy to supportive nurturer, and it is the heroine who brings about this change (27). Zidle does point out that many feminists have taken issue with "the cliché of being 'saved by the love of a good woman,'" claiming that it is "disempowering" (27), but

Zidle quotes Mary Jo Putney, a noted romance author who offers a different perspective:

‘In reality savior complexes are dangerous because they encourage women to stay with abusive mates, but. . .what matters in a romantic context is that healing the wounded hero is a fantasy of incredible potency. Not only does it appeal to the nurturing instincts, but a woman who can heal an injured man has great power.’ (27)

I would argue that the most powerful and successful romance novels keep an appropriate balance of emotional connectivity and sexual tension running through the stories. Romance novels are not just about sex—a sort of soft core porn for women—as they have been accused of being, but sexuality is an important component to them. I would go as far as to suggest that vibrant sexuality coupled with deep emotional connection is at the heart of the fantasy offered in romance novels, a fantasy women continue to return to time and again.

Other romance writers, such as Laura Kinsale, have suggested that the hero carries the romance novel. Kinsale is known as one of the first writers of romances to tell the story from the perspective of the male hero. In her article, “The Androgynous Reader,” Kinsale suggests that the female reader identifies as easily, and perhaps with more delight, with the male character in the romance. She asserts:

I think that, as she [the reader] identifies with the hero, a woman can become what she takes joy in, can realize the maleness in herself, can experience the sensation of living inside a body suffused with masculine

power and grace (adjectives commonly applied to heroes including my own), can explore anger and ruthlessness and passion and pride and honor and gentleness and vulnerability: yes, ma'am, all those old romantic clichés. In short, she can *be* a man. (Krentz 37)

Kinsale goes on to emphasize that this man the reader becomes is of course entirely fictional and an “internal construct” of the readers (37). Others, such as Amber Botts, suggest that the hero is an extension of the female reader’s other self, her shadow self. Botts bases her theory in Carl Jung’s shadow archetype, which according to Botts’s understanding of Jung, is one of the archetypes buried in the collective unconscious of all people, and it “represents denied anger, greed, envy and sexual desire” (Kaler 64). Botts explains that these characteristics manifest themselves mostly in the heroes in romance novels, and that female readers, through the romance experience, become integrated with their darker selves. Some novelists, like Mary Jo Putney, prefer to focus on darkness, and she suggests that she sets the tone in her novels through the hero. She writes: “A laughing, light hero will create a light, playful book, while a dangerous hero is at the heart of most dark romances” (Krentz 100). Putney’s books show the varied nature of the romance fantasy. The only prerequisites for romances are that they have a relationship between the hero and the heroine and that they end happily, but many writers like Putney take readers to dark places along the way, the difference from other fiction being that the reader always knows it will end happily, no matter what type of trauma the characters and by extension, the reader, will have to endure. Putney writes:

My own particular form of dark romance is not for everyone, for it occupies a shadowy corner of the romantic turf where fantasy meets gritty reality. Alcoholism, incest, sexual abuse, rape, dyslexia, epilepsy, and various other physical and psychological injuries—I've written about them all. (101)

What is interesting about the dark labyrinth Putney weaves through her books is that the hero is the important cog in the machine. As I mentioned above, she suggests that he sets the tone. Putney also suggests that a novel can survive a poorly written heroine but not a wimpy hero (101). If romance books are written for women, why is the hero as integral to their success as the heroine? Do we truly want to experience, even if only figuratively, being men? By identifying with the hero are we, as women readers, able to explore freely the dark sides of our natures? And, is it a good thing to associate men, archetypal or not, with darkness? This phenomenon of cross gender identification seemingly does not occur in the Western. The Western is for men and about men, and the female characters do not usurp the lead role.

Although the Western romance and the Western novel share some characteristics of the hero, they treat gender roles differently. In the Western, they are sharply delineated and segregated whereas the romance is constantly negotiating and questioning the roles of men and women. After a battle with Apache Indians in which Hondo loses his horse but still manages to escape with his life (and his saddle) by killing two of the Apaches, the hero is making his way across the desert terrain dragging his saddle, accompanied by his faithful, but mostly feral, dog, Sam. He comes

upon a small ranch nestled in a cliff basin. At this ranch he meets Angie Lowe, who cannot be described as the heroine of the novel, but merely the woman with whom Hondo becomes interested. Immediately, Hondo notices that the ranch is lacking upkeep—the kind that only a man can do. In the romance, the heroine would be able to take care of the ranch as well as any man. In the Western, the woman is exposed and alone and perhaps a little helpless without the protection of a man. For example, as Hondo carefully observes his surroundings, he “hesitates before going to the corral. There was work that needed to be done around here. The little things that are done by a man constantly living around were undone” (230). Angie’s husband is gone. We find out later that he deserted her, exposing her to the dangers of life without the presence of a man, and for doing so, he is portrayed as a weak, shifty character, one whom Hondo ends up killing. Angie is not the feisty heroine of a romance novel who would pick up the pieces left behind by a nefarious villain and create something better than what she started with. Angie is adept at cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores, but the ranch and her welfare are jeopardized by the lack of a male presence. In *West of Everything*, Tompkins shares an interesting anecdote from *Reader’s Digest* about a man who tells a story about him and his wife meeting another couple at a restaurant. The women go shopping, and the man invites the other to go out on his sailboat. In the process of sailing, “the boat grounded and [they] had to climb overboard and shove with all [their] might to get back in deeper water” (13). The man telling the story goes on to write:

As my new friend stood there, ankle deep in muck, the wind blowing his hair wildly, rain streaming down his face, he grinned at me, and with unmistakable sincerity said, 'Sure beats shopping!' (13)

Tompkins explains that these men are just like the heroes in a Louis L'Amour novel. The fantasy of the Western novel is about pitting oneself against nature—and enjoying it. Unlike the romance, where the hero *and* the heroine are adept at facing insurmountable odds, the Western considers this the domain of a man. In fact, as the anecdote illustrates, the Western fantasy suggests that women are unable to comprehend this desire, that women inhabit a separate and inferior domain. Tompkins writes:

Shopping, in this context, not only implies non male activity, it embodies everything that readers of Westerns are trying to get away from: triviality, secondariness, meaningless activity. That the qualities are associated with women is essential to the way Westerns operate as far as gender is concerned. (14)

Hondo sums up the situation at Angie Lowe's ranch quickly. Since the farm was showing signs of disrepair, Hondo assumes that Angie is lacking a male presence. L'Amour repeatedly uses the term, "a man" as a preface to describe what is right and appropriate. A man would do this, and a man does that. A man deals with what is necessary and important. With that short phrase, he implies that it is a real man (the only man of interest in a Western) that does or thinks whatever follows the phrase. For example, of Angie's farm, he writes:

A man could look around and draw his own conclusions. Her father had died, and her husband, whoever he was, had let the place run down. She had been trying to keep it up, but it was a man's job, and she had her woman's work and that child. (241)

It is a man's job. It is something Angie cannot comprehend, and she is unable to keep up the pretense that her husband, her male protection, has been gone for a long time. Hondo can tell at a glance. He knows what a man's business is, and he knows when it is lacking.

In the Western, men seem privy to information that women are not. The world they inhabit is grounded in their interdependence with other men, specifically when it comes to a code to live by or approval or status. I referenced earlier Abby Ziddle's dissection of the mythopoetic brand of masculinity that she says was one of the prevalent "white, middle-class fantasies of masculinity" (Kaler 23) during the 1960s-1990s. As I discussed, homosocial bonds take precedence over male and female bonds. According to Michael Kimmel, in his book, *Manhood in America*, the notion of homosocial bonding is not new to American culture. In this book, he traces the history and evolution of societal constructions of American manhood, and he asserts: "American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment" (7). The Western reinforces this bond among men, and they emphasize that women are outside of it, incapable of understanding it, and women are usually considered to be symbolic of frivolity and vapidness. Kimmel quotes playwright David Mamet's observation that,

“‘[w]omen have, in men’s minds, such a low place on the social ladder of this country that it’s useless to define yourself in terms of a woman. What men need is men’s approval’” (7). In the Western as well as the romance, the male characters quickly size each other up, noting each other’s strength, basically deciding which one is higher in the pecking order, both sniffing out weakness. The main difference between the Western and the romance is that in the romance, the women live up to the potential of their brothers by showing strength and honor. The hero is enlightened to the fact that women are honorable, strong, and capable of handling situations as a man would. The men learn that gender is not a site of rupture. Virtues, such as strength and honor, have little or nothing to do with gender. Though some of the female characters in the Western exhibit some intelligence and verve, they are not the focus of the Western narrative. In fact, Nancy Kerrigan, the love interest in *Flint*, is smart and business savvy. Her father raises her to run the ranch, and after his death, she is doing it efficiently. Flint, whose experience with women is limited to a malicious, but beautiful wife (the femme fatale I will discuss later) who tries to kill him, is surprised by both Nancy’s honor and business acumen. Despite Nancy’s brief moment (actually, a page or two) of the spotlight, the novel emphasizes the journey of the man, for that is the only journey that matters. If the hero comes across a good woman who will enhance his life, then that is an added bonus, but the story is not about their relationship. It is not about their growing respect and admiration for one another like the romance is. The hero of the Western is solitary, a loner, whereas the romance hero may start out that way, but finds himself unwilling to continue life without the companionship of the heroine. In the pages that follow the

ending of the Western, the readers imagine that the hero will have a difficult time sharing his thoughts and his life with a woman. His silent awkwardness with women is still present although his skill or bravery is not doubted. The Western fantasy is not about relationships. It reinforces the triumph of the strong, steely independent brand of masculinity. The kind of masculinity that needs no one else—certainly not the love of a good woman. He is the valiant and victorious hero who triumphed over the bad guys. Their union, if there is one, is not the catharsis of the novel like it is in the romance. That he may now add the component of female companionship to his life is more a reinforcement of his ability to finally have everything that society deems appropriate than it is evidence of any emotional growth in the hero.

This idea of the homosocial bond in men is ever-present in the Western. Flint, who thinks he has incurable cancer and has come to the wilds of New Mexico to die alone, debates with himself about getting involved in Nancy Kerrigan's land dispute. His decision is not based as much on his feelings for Nancy as it is his own sense of honor, the masculine code by which he judges himself and others. He decides:

He wanted no trouble at Horse Springs and wanted none on the North Plains, but long ago he had discovered that one has to make a stand. If a man starts to run, there is nothing to do but keep running. And if a man must die, he could at least die proud of his manhood. It was better to live one day as a lion, than a dozen years as a sheep. (L'Amour 73)

Although Flint wants to help Nancy, impressing her is not his primary motivation. He has to prove his manhood to other men who will judge him. He never backs away from

a fight. Nancy is not likely to appreciate this fact; in fact, she is shocked and a little appalled by his capacity for violence after Flint retaliates swiftly and violently to an attack by hired ranch hands. Nancy witnesses not only his superhuman skill with his fists and his gun, but his brutality. Even though she is horrified by the display, she brings him home to her ranch to recover from his injuries. When he regains consciousness, he comments on her collection of literature, and Nancy is shocked at this evidence of his education. Flint questions her about her assumptions. He says, ““My reactions yesterday disturbed you, is that it? Why do people so readily assume that a man of education cannot be a man of violence—when violence is called for?”” (76). Women in the Western are seemingly befuddled by the actions of men, and to the men, women are incidental in terms of approval. They seek the approval of other men and assume women cannot appreciate displays of male prowess. In the romance, the heroes are also preoccupied with the perceptions of other men because they are generally leaders who want to command the respect of other men; however, the reactions of the heroines are less patterned than the women in *Flint* and *Hondo*. The heroines’ reactions vary depending on their personalities, which are much less monolithic than the Western. Cricket Stewart is capable of inflicting violence as easily as any man. She appreciates the male code of mastery. She is impressed by Creed’s ability to physically dominate other men as she watches him engage his enemy in hand-to-hand combat.

Cricket watched Creed shed the thin veneer of civilization and become once more the consummate Comanche warrior. He stripped away the rest of his torn shirt leaving himself dressed in buckskin trousers and knee-

high moccasins. His scarred chest was shiny and slick with sweat. Blood dripped unattended from the slashed arm and was soaked up by the parched ground beneath him. The wind whipped his black hair back from the sharp angles of his proud face. [. . .] The hills had gone silent to witness yet another combat to determine the bravest and the best. As it had been for centuries for both man and beast, so it was now. (Johnston 425)

Cricket's reaction to this display is different from the women in *Flint* and *Hondo*. She recognizes and even appreciates their time-honored codes, but she also recognizes her own desire for vengeance, self-preservation, and mastery over Tall Bear, the villain who seeks to rape and mutilate her body as a means of punishing Creed for past wrongs. She decides that, "she will let them have their noble battle without interference. Then, if Tall Bear still lived, she would kill him" (425). Interestingly, Creed is willing to accept Cricket's manly ability to enact violence. From the moment he meets her, and she trains a bow and arrow on him, he nicknames her *Brava*, or brave one. Creed is the first man who does not view her as freakish. The romance leaves more room for negotiating gender roles.

CHAPTER 5

MYSOGYNY IN THE WESTERN

In addition to leaving little room for gender role negotiation, the Western contains elements of misogyny. Jane Tompkins asserts that for the Western, language is associated with inaction and effeminacy, suggesting that real men *do*. They *do not talk*. She explains that in the Western

[t]here are two choices: either you can remain in a world of illusions, by which is understood religion, culture, and class distinctions, a world of fancy words and pretty actions, of ‘manners for the parlor and the ball room, and...womanly tricks for courting’; or you can face life as it really is—blood, death, a cold wind blowing, and a gun in the hand. (48)

Consequently, the characters in Westerns who manipulate language are educated, religious, or are deeply suspect in some other way. Many of the characters who excel at the skills of civilized society are women. Tompkins asserts that “[b]ecause the genre is in revolt against a Victorian culture where the ability to manipulate languages confers power, the Western equates power with ‘not-language.’ And not-language it equates with being male” (55). This notion of work and industry defining masculinity is perhaps rooted in post-Revolutionary ideology. Kimmel, in his book, *Manhood in America*, asserts that the men of the fledgling Republic associated work with virtue, and by the

middle of the nineteenth century, “a veritable cult of the Self-Made Man had appeared, as young men devoured popular biographies and inspirational homilies to help future self-made men create themselves” (26). European aristocracy was associated with effeminacy, which in America trickled down to the Genteel Patriarch, such as Thomas Jefferson who was

castigated as dandified, the product of aristocratic and chivalric Virginia [. . .] He was accused of ‘timidity, whimsicalness,’ ‘a wavering of disposition’ and weakness for flattery, a man who ‘took counsel in his feelings and imagination,’ and the Jeffersonians were condemned for their ‘womanish resentment’ against England and their ‘womanish attachment to France.’ (27)

Women are associated with weakness, so men define themselves in opposition to them. Language is a tool women use. Men prove themselves through action and industry. In America, men earn the land they cultivate, and in the Western, men claim land and get to keep it if they are strong enough to hold it. European notions of inherited lands and money are foreign and repellent to the man of the West. For the Western, the East is symbolic of European effeminacy. The hero in a Western wants little to do with the trappings of refinement, and unfortunately for the women in the novels, they are associated with civility. According to Kimmel, “every time they [early American men] went off to work, they ran away from women to prove themselves with other men” (42). The Western reinforces this notion throughout the novels; in fact, it *is* the Western fantasy.

Another misogynist notion advanced by the Western, and to a certain extent, the romance, is that women are sometimes portrayed as femme fatales; they are beautiful and dangerous. Perhaps they are dangerous because they are beautiful and thus exert a control and power over men. In the romance, this trope has lessened, but it certainly is prevalent in romance novels prior to the 1990s. In the romance, the femme fatale is usually an ex-mistress, a dead wife from a loveless marriage, or an eligible woman seeking to coerce the hero into marriage. This femme fatale also serves as a foil to the sincere, genuine heroine. Typically, the hero has been mistreated by a woman and is deeply distrustful of them, considering them to be completely without honor. She is the cause of his cold remoteness, and it is up to the heroine to show him that not all women are vipers. In Lindsey's *Savage Thunder*, Colt Thunder is betrayed and emotionally scarred by a woman in the first few pages of the book. It is she who watches his brutal whipping without blinking an eye, "[. . .] her expression as hard and unemotional as her father's" (8). From that point on, Colt displays his Cheyenne heritage blatantly, dressing in traditional Indian dress whereas before, he had presented himself as white, but as he flaunts his heritage physically, his emotional capacity shrivels. Jenny Callan is beautiful and cold. She reminds Colt that women are not to be trusted, that at best, they represent frivolity, and at their worst, they are capable of dangerous malice and spite. What is important about the romance, though, is that in the end, the hero learns that not all women are evil, that the heroine is as trustworthy as his most beloved male companions, and that she is, perhaps, infinitely preferable company.

The Western, however, does not seem to offer much redemption for women. In *Flint*, Lottie Kettleman is Flint's scheming wife, who he finds out conspires with her father to kill him for his money. James T. Kettleman leaves his money and his New York business behind when he fakes his own disappearance from New York. He takes on the persona of Jim Flint, a dangerous gunslinger who took James in when he was left orphaned. Lottie is the typical femme fatale. She has, "red-gold hair with almost violet eyes and the clear, creamy skin that one occasionally sees in truly beautiful red-haired women" (L'Amour 118). Lottie is not only beautiful, but she is dressed in the latest fashions. She reeks of the East—a place of extreme disgust for the men of the West. Lottie's fashionable clothing and fair looks are outward signs of her inner maliciousness. Men in the West did not expect or perhaps even desire beautiful women because of what they seem to represent. The narrator explains that, "[b]eautiful women were rare in Alamitos, and beautiful women dressed in the very latest Paris fashion were unheard of" (119). The tone of the novel reinforces to the reader that neither her fancy clothes nor her winsome charms are considered particular virtues. When Lottie meets Flint on the street after having followed him west to Alamitos, she is completely dismayed by his terse greeting. Conniving women are full of words. Men like Flint do not waste their time.

As Tompkins explains, the men in the Westerns spend little time talking because language is associated with femininity. Tompkins references Peter Schwenger's book, *Phallic Critiques*. She points out that he has "identified a style of writing he calls 'the language of men,' a language that belongs to what he terms the School of Virility,

starting with Jack London and continuing through Ernest Hemingway to Norman Mailer and beyond” (55). The terse, ““bitten-off fragments,”” (55) that Schwenger analyzes are the mainstay of the popular Western. Tompkins draws on Schwenger’s notions about language and gender to illustrate the reason for weak and ineffectual heroines in the Western. She notes that:

Schwenger shows the connections these authors [of the School of Virility] make among speaking, feeling, and feminization. ‘It is by talking,’ he writes, ‘that one opens up to another person and becomes vulnerable. It is by putting words to an emotion that it becomes feminized.’ [. . .] Thus, ‘not talking is a demonstration of masculine control over emotion.’ (56)

Throughout *Flint* and *Hondo*, the heroes use words sparingly. Not only do the women find them uncommunicative, the other men also note their lack of speech. Flint is moving through the night, trying to seek refuge in a hidden cave when he hears a lone rider approaching. As a skilled tracker and survivor, he is cautious and quiet. Though discovered by the seemingly friendly stranger, he offers as few words as possible to the stranger’s questions. After being asked who he is, Flint responds, ““I am a man who minds his own affairs [. . .] and that’s all I ask of others”” (L’Amour 35). The stranger, who is also an honorable and worthy man, is not offended by Flint’s aloofness, but he does note that their conversation is ““[m]ighty one-sided”” (35). Interestingly, Tompkins asserts that the “Western’s hatred of language is not a philosophical matter only; it has codified and sanctioned the way several generations of men have behaved verbally

toward women in American society” (Tompkins 59). According to Tompkins, male silence juxtaposed with female verbosity “establishes male superiority, and silences the one who would engage in conversation” (60). Tompkins draws a corollary between the Western’s employment of language and socially-constructed male and female communication patterns. She suggests that Western’s use of language reduces women to blathering nothingness, asserting that, “the message [. . .] in the case of women in Westerns generally is that there’s nothing *to* them. They may seem strong and resilient, fiery and resourceful at first, but when push comes to shove, as it always does, they crumble” (61).

CHAPTER 6
THE EAST VERSUS THE WEST

As I have already mentioned, in both the Western romance and the Western, the East represents softness and fragility. The rugged characters are deeply distrustful of Easterners, and women often embody the cultural civility characteristic of the East. Jocelyn Fleming in *Savage Thunder*, who comes to America from England, offers another version of the Western Frontier heroine who is different from the tough Cricket Stewart. Jocelyn is spunky and resourceful, but completely unused to the rugged Western landscape. She is the epitome of the tenderfoot—one who is used to the softness of city life. Since she is English, she is a complete outsider. Since the Revolution, England (and Europe in general) represented effeminacy and corruption to Americans of the frontier. Men of America, and to a larger degree, the men of West, disdain the ways of the foppish aristocracy, and embrace a brand of masculinity that exemplifies raw-boned strength. Jocelyn Fleming is particularly suspect to the rugged hero, Colt Thunder, because she is a European woman. Colt is unimpressed by her status whereas others around him respond to her pedigree. After having saved Jocelyn from the bounty hunter who wishes her dead, Jocelyn wants to hire Colt as an escort to get her safely through the rough terrain of the West. She sends one of her the dedicated men of her considerable entourage to Colt's room to request a meeting. Colt refuses and

shocks her spokesman by not using the proper address for Jocelyn since she is an English duchess. The spokesman corrects Colt:

‘There are proper modes of address for a duchess, sir. You may refer to her as Her Grace, or Her Ladyship, or even Lady Fleming, but she is never referred to as ‘the woman.’ It just isn’t done, sir.’ (Lindsey 98)

Colt has no use for titles or consequence. His half brother, Billy, who was raised back East, is embarrassed by Colt’s lack of manners. Even though he is American and supposedly does not value aristocratic conventions, he is aware of them, and tries to get his brother to understand the insult he has dealt Jocelyn. Colt is the consummate Western hero. He disdains pretension and fancy talking. Billy, who easily functions in the world of the East, is not able to survive on his own in the West. Colt has been sent by Billy’s mother to bring him back home, and Colt rescues him from involvement with a bad gang. The message being that Billy may understand civility and society manners, but he is not a survivor like Colt. His Eastern manners make him unsuitable for the rugged West where all that matters is a man’s ability to survive. Language is ineffectual. Billy is aware that Colt commits a grievous faux pas in front of the men of Jocelyn’s entourage, and Billy wants Colt to understand that he has insulted them, so he tries to explain what a duchess means in terms of status in his own experience with the Indian tribe. He says:

‘A duchess is a member of the English nobility, the wife of a duke. The nobility of England have different degrees of importance—barons, earls, and such. A comparison would be your minor chiefs and war leaders.

But you can't get any more important than a duke or duchess, unless you're a member of the royal family.' (97)

Since Colt is half Cheyenne, Billy tries to make a comparison to the hierarchy in the tribe, so that he will take Jocelyn's status seriously. Through this comparison, Colt realizes that Jocelyn is due proper respect in front of her servants.

CHAPTER 7

PORTRAYAL OF NATIVE AMERICANS

One of the main issues in this novel is prejudice. Most Westerns, both romances and popular Westerns are fraught with the controversy of Anglo versus Native American. As I mentioned earlier, Colt is beaten savagely because he, a 'half-breed,' presumed to court a white woman. By the time he meets the heroine, Jocelyn, he is hardened toward most people, and more specifically, white women. Despite this fact, he does try to help Jocelyn when her carriage becomes runaway. The fact that Jocelyn is friendly and grateful to him puzzles Colt. He figures that "her nationality explained why she hadn't minded touching him" (62). But Colt cannot afford for her to not understand. He had almost died because his heritage was concealed, and he wants her to know immediately who he is. When she asks him if he is an American, he says, "I was born in this country, but folks got a different name for me, lady. I'm a half-breed" (63). Jocelyn is unimpressed by the term, unfamiliar with the prejudice associated with the American Indian. She responds, "How interesting. It sounds like something to do with stock and crossbreeding. What does it have to do with people?" (63). The fact that Jocelyn is English means that she does not share the prejudice toward the American Indian. In fact, she sends one of her people to discover the nature of the enmity between whites and Indians. Jocelyn learns that it is simply "a matter of prejudice. The half-

breed, he is considered the same as the Indian, and the Indian, he is treated with contempt and loathing. [. . .] To hide the fear, you understand. The Indian, he is still greatly feared in this place” (92). This quote exemplifies the ambivalence toward Native Americans in both the Western romance and the Western. These books mix admiration with reinforcement of negative stereotypes. It is not fair to say that these books are anti-Native American because the heroes are often half Native American, or they have married and lived among the Indian tribes. Interestingly, the American Indian is portrayed as the ultimate survivor. The warrior’s skills are legendary. His ability to track, hunt, and kill strike fear in the hearts of Anglos but also admiration. The Western hero appreciates the Indian, but he is wary of the danger he poses. The American Indian is simultaneously the hero and the villain in these Western novels. Many Western romances contain stories of brutal massacres by Indians, but they also include betrayal, mistreatment and cruelty on the part of the white man. In one of Johanna Lindsey’s Western romances, *A Heart So Wild*, the hero, Chandos, who is white but is raised among the Comanches, has entered the white world seeking vengeance for the rape and murder of his ten-year-old half sister and his mother by white settlers. This book, as do many other Westerns, continues to pit Anglos against Native Americans. They simultaneously reinforce the notion of the Indian as animalistic butcher and wronged victim. In a disturbing scene at the beginning of the book, Chandos and the other warriors of his tribe who were away hunting when the settlers attacked the camp of women and children, are about to exact revenge on one of the attackers. They have staked Elroy, the settler, out on the ground, naked. They are torturing him because they

are trying to get him to reveal information about the other men involved in the attack and because they want him to suffer. Just as the reader is beginning to, if not empathize with the rapist, at least be horrified with the torture tactics of the sadistic ‘heroes,’ Elroy seals his fate—with Chandos and the reader. He tells Chandos, “‘She [his half-sister] was good. Not much meat on her, but she pleased me real well. I was the last to have her. She died under me, with my—’ (31). Chandos’s revenge is swift:

The howl came from deep in the warrior’s soul, cutting off Elroy’s taunt. One of the others tried to stop the young warrior but couldn’t [They wanted to torture Elroy slowly]. The pain was minimal for Elroy, bringing to a crescendo all the rest of the pain. It was the shock of seeing the severed flesh he had been about to mention raised high in the Comanche’s hand that killed him. (32)

Elroy’s horrific brutality typifies the treatment of Native Americans by many Anglos. Many are victimized, but the novels move through a strange enactment of victimization and revenge. The reader sympathizes with Chandos, not Elroy. The hero is not gratuitously violent, but he is capable of darkness when needed.

This ambivalence toward the Native American is a convention of both the Western romance and the Western. In *Frontier Woman*, Jarrett Creed is kidnapped, along with his mother, by Indians and is raised to manhood by them. He adopts their ways and marries into the tribe until he is forced by his father, who represents the prejudiced white man, to leave his wife in order to save her. His father threatens to kill her if Creed refuses to return to his life with him as a white man. Creed’s father

reinforces the pernicious stereotype that a Native American is dirty, that his touch taints a woman. Creed's father wants nothing to do with his wife once Indians capture her. She is dirty, not worthy of him any longer. Unfortunately, Creed finds out that his brother, Tom, shares these prejudices when his own wife, Amy, is captured along with Cricket and is raped repeatedly by many Indian warriors. Tall Bear is Creed's enemy, and he wants to punish Creed through Cricket. Tall Bear realizes that torturing Amy will punish Cricket more than her own rape, and it will also prolong the agony of macabre anticipation. Tall Bear is simultaneously enacting personal vengeance against Creed and vengeance against the whites for their betrayal over a treaty. In Westerns, the Indians are alternately the victims, aggressors and heroes. Before he rapes Amy, he says, "Bring me the Yellow-Haired Woman [Amy]. We will leave a message to show the White-eyes in San Antonio what happens when we do *not* come in peace, so they will know the difference next time" (Johnston 313). Women, in both the Western romance and the Western are repeatedly victimized due to vengeance. Certainly, men are killed and tortured as well, but the ultimate act of vengeance seems to be the rape of a woman. Women are often told that they will 'wish they were dead' after the man or men are 'through with them.' Rape is the primary means of power and mastery over the women, but it is also the way men enact revenge against other men. Men are not raped or sodomized, but they are made to suffer through the rape of the women they love. Cricket resists the idea that she would 'wish she were dead,' and once the Indians capture she and Amy, she urges Amy to survive at all costs. Amy is already worrying about Tom's reaction to her fate. She says, "Cricket, do you think Creed will have you

back when the Comanche's are done with you? [. . .] I love Tom, Cricket. He is my life. I don't think I could live if he ever turned away from me'" (312). Unfortunately, Amy gets the opportunity to find out that Tom does initially reject her because of her 'defilement' at the hands of the Comanches. Tom thinks to himself:

She was alive! But lost to him all the same. She was soiled with the kind of dirt that wasn't ever going to wash off, just as his mother had been.

He'd never be able to hold her in his arms without remembering that her legs had been spread for an entire band of filthy Comanches." (320)

Cricket is horrified by his reaction and confronts him repeatedly about his rejection of Amy. Jarrett and Tom fight bitterly over it, and it causes a rift in their relationship. Eventually, Tom comes to terms with his prejudice, and he and Amy work through their problems. The Western romance and the Western offer complicated and mixed messages when it comes to their treatment of Native Americans. Perhaps they are simply trying to capture the complicated continuum of attitudes toward them in the American West. It is an important issue in novels of West, one that could be the focus of an entire paper of its own. For the purposes of this paper, I want to recognize the connection as a convention, and point out specifically that the heroes are often connected by blood, marriage, or prowess to the Native American. I also think it is important that women are the primary victims of vengeance between the two groups in both the Western romance and the Western.

CHAPTER 8

LEGITIMIZATION

8.1 Industry Organizations

The conventions of the romance Western and the Western are a part of a larger issue surrounding these genres. As part of the world of popular fiction, they face a certain amount of disdain from literary scholars. In fact, the popular Western faces mostly the issue of intellectual snobbery, but the romance deals with criticism from many quarters, and is considered by many to be the lowest of low art. The romance genre must also face criticism in the popular realm, and its many readers and writers concern themselves with the idea of legitimization. In addition to my own experience with people's reactions to the romances I read, I found many forums for readers and writers to discuss the myriad issues surrounding the genre.

A primary source for romance readers, writers, editors, publishers, and art directors, is a website named *All About Romances (AAR)*. *AAR* is written and edited by volunteer reviewers, editors, and writers in the romance novel industry with diverse backgrounds and education. The Western also has a website called, *Western Writers of America (WWA)*. On the "About" page of the website, the *WWA* defines its purpose.

Western Writers of American was founded in 1953 to promote the literature of the American West and to bestow Spur Awards for distinguished writing in the Western field. [. . .] *WWA* actively helps its

member promote their books and articles, and aggressively promotes the literature of the American West, which it considers the country's unique contribution to world literature.

Although it does address the legitimacy of the genre, the Western does not contend with the same legitimacy issues that the romance does. Its primary issue is the fact that is considered light, lowbrow fiction by literary critics. On an internet blog site, titled *2 Blowhards*, in which the editors describe themselves as, "a group of graying eternal amateurs [who] discuss their passions, interests and obsessions, among them: movies, art, politics, evolutionary biology, taxes, writing, computers, these kids these days, and lousy educations," a guest, Tim Hulsey, posts on the issue of Western novels. The question he raises goes to the heart of legitimacy for the Western.

Why Westerns are not often studied in the Eastern academy is an interesting question. It pertains part to the class expectations that come with 'genre fiction'—too trashy, not tony enough, very lowbrow stuff. Westerns are more frequently studied in the West as fodder for 'cultural studies,' but still not read as often as I think they should be.

Popular Western novel legitimacy is primarily concerned with raising its status to literature of the American West, such as Harte and Steinbeck. This website is not the cyber equivalent of *AAR* because the romance genre's quest for legitimacy involves many more factors.

In light of the ever-present pall cast on the romance novel's legitimacy, Anne Marble, a column writer for *AAR*'s message board, "At the Back Fence," discusses the

discrepancy between people's responses to romance fiction and other genres that employ similar stereotypes and formulaic writing. She notes that these other genres are not considered with the same derision and rancor as the romance genre. Marble does not attempt to prove that some of the negative issues raised about women's representation in novels do not exist in romance fiction, but she seems to want to rally behind the idea that the romance novel is being persecuted unfairly. Marble, along with the romance readerdom, wants respect—respect for the genre and respect for the readers and writers of this fiction. What I would suggest is that the process of legitimization is a type of resistance, and these women attempt to assert agency with every article they write in defense of the genre, every romance conference they attend and organizations they form.

Almost all of these discussions on the *AAR* website move along the lines of lending authority to the genre. Found among the “At the Back Fence” message board archive, is a 1999 article by Elaine Wethington, Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Sociology at Cornell University, titled “Are Academic Opinions About Romance Novels All Negative?” She situates herself as a sociologist with an interest in popular cultural studies who is studying the evolution of the romance novel genre. She also reads romance novels for pleasure. In her article, she shares some of her findings with fellow romance readers. She explains the scholarly context of her work:

Younger academics—primarily those referred to collectively as ‘post-modernists’ have a very keen interest in popular culture, and some

promote it as unrecognized art. Their views are in sharp contrast to the older academic view, which made sharp distinctions between high and 'low' culture, and characterized popular culture (e.g. romance novels, TV series, fantasy fiction, Westerns) as pulp [. . .].

Wethington gets to the heart of cultural studies. The fact that the staff of *AAR* would wish to include a scholarly opinion speaks to the desire to legitimize, or to use Wethington's phrase, "gentrify." Wethington discusses the fact that other popular genres such as mysteries and science fiction have "[. . .] undergone a process sociologists label Gentrification. Gentrification occurs when members of educated classes (and critics) begin to treat a popular reading or entertainment genre as 'art'" whereas romance novels have not undergone this transformation. The romance readerdom desperately seeks this transformation. Wethington says that one of the "indicators of gentrification is regular attention in *The New York Times Book Review*."

Richard Pollack, in his article, "What's in a Pseudonym?" discusses the fact that the romance genre is not taken seriously, that "[. . .] *The New York Times's* and other best-seller lists disdain the genre" (225). He goes on to point out that in order for some authors to gain legitimacy as a writer, they cease to write romance fiction and begin writing "'women's fiction'" (225). In a September 26, 1999 article on the *AAR* website titled, "Why Don't They Just Call it Fiction: An Attempt to Differentiate Contemporary Romance and Women's Fiction," the staff writer, Carol Irvin, poses an answer to that question. She suggests that "[s]ome people feel that women's fiction is far more 'legitimate' within the world of novels. Probably because the word romance is not used.

Some also might feel that a work of women's fiction is by nature better than a work of (single title) contemporary romance." When she tries to determine how women's fiction and romance differ, she has trouble making a distinction. She says that both women's fiction and romance are "[. . .] likely to be read only by women and concerns characters and subjects which generally only appeal to women as well." She goes on to say that as with romance, women's fiction usually has a romantic relationship between a hero and heroine and a happy ending. The only distinction she makes is that women's fiction pays more attention to secondary characters than do romance novels.

Romance novels have yet to legitimize, despite the best efforts of its writers and its readerdom. Wethington says that she has discussed the issue of gentrification for the romance genre with colleagues who have read her work on Western romances, and she says that their comments "point to several 'sticking points'—reasons why they are uncomfortable with the notion that good romance novels can rise to the level of art." Wethington's "sticking points" are indeed some of those hot buttons that spark debate. These points of contention are 1. "[r]omances are all the same," 2. "[r]omances are produced by publishers who demand conformity to a set formula, not by authors exercising full creativity," 3. "[r]omances promote a conservative message about male-female relationships," and 4. "[r]omances are borderline pornography." Wethington refutes each of these points. What is interesting is that she attempts to explain to the romance readerdom that "[. . .] many academics are firmly committed to a more radical style of feminism and are against pornography. They still equate opposition to academic feminism and enjoyment of sex scenes as indicative of a lack of education." According

to the *Romance Writers of America's 2005 Market Research Study of Romance Readers*, sixty-six percent of readers of romance novels have attended college. Fifteen percent even have advanced degrees. Since over half of the readership has received some type of higher education, I do not think it is as simple as equating enjoyment of sexually explicit material with a lack of education.

When considering this particular representation of academic feminism, I was immediately struck by Constance Penley's appeal in her article, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture." She writes: "My final question, then, is to contemporary feminism and its work on popular culture: are we ready, like the slash fans, 'to explore strange new worlds . . . to boldly go where no one has gone before?'" (492). I think it is a source of dismay and frustration for readers and writers of romance novels that their work/pleasure is seemingly polemically at odds with the agendas and standards of academics or any feminist group.

An on-line interview on *AAR's* website featuring Kay Mussell, a scholar at American University, asks the question: Are romance novels and feminism mutually exclusive? In the past, Mussell, a feminist and academic, had been a critic of romance novels. The interviewer contacted her and wanted to hear her opinions on the subject. Mussell admitted to being hard on romance novels in the past, especially those written in the late 1970s and 80s, which are reputed to be a "[. . .] kind of backlash against the more aggressive and controversial aspects of feminism—something that reaffirmed traditional values and made women who hadn't bought into the feminist critique feel

validated about their own choices.” Mussell discussed the fact that romance has evolved from that time. She says:

One reason, of course, is that romances have changed with the times. The newer romances incorporate feminist themes while still reaffirming more traditional notions about love and family. Moreover, many romance writers have openly claimed feminist values and, in the process, rejected easy stereotypes about themselves and their work.

She goes on to say that not only have the politics of romance novels changed, but feminism itself has as well. Feminism has begun to encompass wider-ranging possibilities into the agenda.

I have already mentioned the fact that in their desire to legitimize and thus claim agency, the romance readerdom creates and maintains extensive communal organization. There are many romance novel websites where readers and writers can go to get book reviews, post messages on discussion boards, and have access to newsletters that address the issues that surround romance fiction. In addition to websites, the official organization for published and beginning writers in the romance industry is the Romance Writers of America (RWA). According to the “About Us” page on their website, the RWA has over 9,500 members with approximately 1,600 of them published authors. They hold yearly conferences and produce a journal that is distributed to their readers. They consider themselves to be “[t]he voice of romance.” They created this organization as a reaction to the alienation they encountered in the writing industry. The “What Is It?” page of their website suggests that “[f]rustrated with

writing conferences that seemed to ignore romance writers, and individually voiceless against daunting New York publishers, the founding members realized the need to unite.”

8.2 Publishing Practices

For the purposes of this paper, I focused primarily on the *AAR* website. In their mission statement, they claim to “[. . .] to provide honest, thoughtful and entertaining material in order to promote intelligent and diverse discussion about romance novels [. . .].” One of their on-going discussions focuses specifically on cover art in what they term the “Cover Art Controversy.” This discussion will encompass representations in romance novels of both heroines/heroes and history in historical romances. The analysis of cover art/publishing practices raises the many issues of representation in romance novels, specifically how these readers want romance novels, and thus themselves as readers/writers, to be represented.

Since 1999, the *AAR* website has an annual cover contest. As I have mentioned before, romance novels have their own sub genres: historical, regency, series, suspense, inspirational, fantasy and alternate reality. A committee comprised of *AAR* staff members decides on worthy covers to place in each of the categories, and after the nominations have been made, they open the voting to the public. The process of selecting nominees is intricate, and the analysis of these covers resembles a New Critical close reading of literature. This entire process is a prime example of legitimization. This website is going to great lengths to show the intelligence and analytical ability of the people who read, write, and write about these books. This

website evinces the careful, deliberate, and thoughtful process behind selecting reading material.

A huge frustration for readers and writers of romance novels, and what goes to the heart of the cover controversy, is the fact that writers have little or no control over the covers selected for their books. The publishers control this procedure, and of course, the capitalist market controls the publishers. The essence of the cover controversy is agency. Writers and their readers want to reclaim it. Publishers frequently choose covers that represent women or the genre in a way that is less-than-flattering, even demeaning, and many readers and writers feel that it leads to the negativity that surrounds romance fiction. The incongruous aspect of the controversy is that publishers claim that they choose these objectionable covers because they sell books. If they repel the writers and readers, then why do they sell so well? This very question comes up in on-line discussions on the AAR website, and there are a variety of responses to it. Most of the women claim that they do not consider the covers of the books when buying them, that they turn a blind eye to the ones that offend them, since it is not the main criteria for selecting a book. According to the RWA's 2003 market research survey, *Romance-Fiction: Sales Statistics, Reader Demographics and Book-Buying Habits*, the number one factor considered in purchasing romance novels is the description on the back cover. A short "flip through" of the books' contents came in second. Coming in third place, was word of mouth, which is possible mostly through websites like the AAR. AAR provides detailed criticisms of the many novels available. In fact, their

mission statement specifically states that they “[. . .] help readers determine how best to spend their romance novel dollar.”

Despite the fact that most readers ignore the objectionable covers, the controversy surrounding this issue is explosive. It seems to stem primarily from this desire amongst the readerdom to cloak the genre in respectability. Lisa Harrell, a romance reader commenting on objectionable covers in “Part I” of the four pages dedicated to the “Cover Controversy,” makes an interesting statement and brings up an important question.

[. . .] I think publishers must think women are stupid. Do they really think they will sell more books if they have a racy cover instead of some nice design of a sword? It would do a lot for the genre if those covers were gone. Another problem with respect for romance books is that it is written by women for women and society can't seem to respect that. Mysteries and SCI-FI have both men and women writers [. . .] and since men both read and write in those genres it is given more respect. So romance may never receive much respect.

Clearly, publishers do believe that the covers sell. Perhaps the publishers or society in general do not want to lend this genre any respectability.

The covers that spark the controversy most often are variations on what is known as the “clinch” cover. The clinch cover involves a well-muscled, bare-chested man and a beautiful, voluptuous woman (who is more than likely spilling out of her clothing) clutching each other in a passionate (and seemingly quite uncomfortable)

embrace. Typically, the heroine is bent backward, gazing passionately in the hero's eyes. It seems to represent all that is objectionable about romance novels. Readers on the *AAR* discussion boards, friends of mine who read romance novels, and I all have a story to tell about the embarrassing moment of truth when you pull out a romance novel with one of these clinch covers, and friends, family, and virtual strangers raise eyebrows and smirk at your reading tastes, your intellect, and your morality.

Going hand in hand with the cover art contest are the "Cover Controversy" pages. Readers and writers post their opinions and keep up a running dialogue about this volatile issue. The reactions to clinch covers vary in intensity. Reader Jill Shepler writes that "[c]linch covers have probably kept me from buying books by authors I'm not familiar with." Many of the women on the discussion board admitted to buying slipover covers to camouflage their clinch covers when they read in public. Most of the women are imploring writers to use their clout (which we know is not much) and resist the publishers' and art directors' insistence on these clinch covers. They are convinced that the covers strip away the integrity of the genre, are degrading to women, and do not adequately represent the quality of the novel or its very pro-woman sentiment. Rebecca Ekmark admits that her feminist grounding reacts uncomfortably to the clinch cover and what it seems to represent. She writes: "I am still uncomfortable looking at any clinch cover, because it almost always displays a dominant, oddly hairless man, and a very submissive, overly exposed, large breasted woman. My feminist hackles automatically rise."

In opposition to that idea, a few women are angry that these women would hide their covers or refuse to go into a bookstore and buy romance books in front of people. Many women are so embarrassed by the covers (or people's reactions to them) that they buy their books on-line. The opposition insists that women should proudly purchase whatever reading material they choose and not allow anyone to dictate their reading material. They were tired of analyzing or explaining the covers between themselves or to other non-readers. They believe that such explanations weaken their agency, and they do not feel that they owe anyone explanations. Some of these women proclaimed proudly that they like the sexual steaminess of the covers and enjoy looking at the scantily clad male and female bodies. They feel like they are asserting their control over their femininity and sexuality. One reader, Karen Williams, even suggests that romance readers should appreciate their roots and not quibble over the covers. She points out that “[. . .] quite honestly, those clinch covers, whether anyone likes it or not, helped put romance on the map. The reader profile has changed over the years, but romance came with those covers and they are as much a part of the whole process as anything.”

In the annual cover contests on *AAR*, the results are posted with a picture of the cover and a short analysis of the cover and why it was chosen. Committee members discuss the different aspects of the art including theme, use of color, and lighting, but they focus mostly on the way the heroine and hero are depicted and the overall tone. According to the “Cover Controversy” discussions, tastes do vary on cover art, but certain poses raise the ire of most readers and writers. A particular cover on Danelle Harmon's, *The Beloved One*, features a haughty man with a billowing white shirt blown

off to the side to expose part of his muscled (and hairless!) chest who is staring down at an equally windblown woman who is on her knees before him, clutching desperately at his legs. Readers *hate* this cover. The author of this segment, Carol Irvine, suggests in her AAR article, “Covers Covered By Carol: The Romance Hero,” that readers hate it because “[. . .] [t]hey feel the woman is in a submissive position and, because he has an arrogant look on his face, he is using her as a sex object.” One reader pointed out that since romance novels are geared mostly toward women, then it should at least be a fantasy cover from a woman’s perspective. Evidently, this led to more covers with just the hero on them, and the salient issue was raised—are we not just exchanging one objectification for another? Publishers and art directors have tried to circumvent the issue of the degrading clinch by creating other covers that have flowers or landscapes instead, but these covers also garner criticism because they seem boring or contrived, and do not necessarily lead anyone observing a person’s reading material to think: “Wow! What an intellectual book!” The debate returns continually to readers and writers wanting to gain respect for their genre, but thus far, there has not been a unanimous opinion on what type of covers will accomplish this feat.

Another interesting aspect of legitimization is publishing itself. Many writers are fighting for agency in the huge multimillion conglomerate that is the romance industry. In his article, “What’s in a Pseudonym,” Richard Pollack discusses the monopoly of Harlequin Enterprises. Harlequin denies writers contracts unless they will agree to creating a pseudonym for themselves. These pseudonyms, claims Pollack, are “[. . .] a Harlequin ploy aimed at keeping its stable of writers strictly tethered to the

corporate hitching post” (223). Harlequin has been refusing to give the authors back the rights to their pseudonyms, and if the authors wish to get the rights to their pseudonym back after a book goes out of print, then they are not allowed to take that pseudonym and write with another publisher. Many authors and agents feel powerless and choose not to fight. Some writers have tried to get the RWA to fight this battle against Harlequin, but they have been silent on the issue, causing some of its members to break away from the RWA and form Novelists Inc. Pollack notes that “[. . .] [Novelists Inc.] is squarely behind [The Author’s Guild’s] investigation of Harlequin’s pseudonym tactics” (226). The publishers do not take their writers seriously, and in the case of Harlequin, they capitalize on the genre’s mass produced appeal and try to take the power away from the authors.

8.3 Depiction of the Heroine

As often as there is criticism from outside of the romance community, the romance community itself deals with contentious issues, which I believe all center on the need for legitimacy and agency. As I have already discussed, feminist groups, academics and other non-readers criticize the genre for its depiction of women through the heroine. The debate does not end outside of the community. Writers and readers continue to grapple with the issue. Historical romances pose a difficult problem because they are set in intensely patriarchal time periods. A heroine usually has to use her wits to overpower a medieval male because her societal and legal rights were negligible. I have found that most of the heroines in historical novels are resisting the prescribed societal restraints, and that resistance is usually causing the heroine problems, but it also

usually attracts the hero and engenders respect. There is a fine line in the depiction of the strong-willed, beyond-her-time heroine—she might seem too beyond her time. Writers and readers argue that most of the heroes in these historicals disdain frail or submissive heroines and are attracted to their spunky streak, but perhaps this is a more recent phenomenon. Certainly, I have read romances where the heroine is a little too submissive and dependent on the men in her life, be they brothers or fathers. The often talked about issue is the virginity clause—a part of almost any historical. The young, inexperienced girl is usually paired with the older, experienced gentleman. The heroine’s virginity is usually assumed, if not explicitly stated. It does seem to be part of the “formula,” but this concept is historically accurate. The question may be: Why do women (especially those of us who claim to be feminists) want to read about this? I do not know if that question is answerable. In her article, “The Traditional Romance Formula,” Marilyn Lowery writes:

The youthfulness of the heroine can also add to her vulnerability. To the hero’s thirty or thirty-five, she can be as young as seventeen [. . .] This age difference helps to ensure that she is a virgin, and the suggestion is that she is more desirable and, again, more vulnerable. (218)

She does not indicate that this is a product of the time period although she does mention that some contemporaries in certain publishing lines do not require the heroine to be a virgin. Lowery’s piece was written in 1983, and the genre’s feminist attitudes have significantly evolved.

Novels with contemporary settings have complete latitude to create strong, independent women, and based on the comments from the readerdom, they typically do. Intelligence really should not factor into the historical dilemma because women can be intelligent in any time period, so it is rare to come across a stupid heroine. Writers and readers reject that concept all together. Those novels that do incorporate a weak or stupid heroine usually become what the readers of *AAR* call “wallbangers.” Wallbangers are novels that are so poorly written or commit so grievous a faux pas (such as creating a stupid heroine!) they go flying across the room and hit the wall, never to be read again. Most readers and writers feel strongly that the heroine should be strong and independent, whether that is considered appropriate for her in the time period or not. Typically, the heroines are resourceful, intelligent, and compassionate. If anything, some heroines are one-sided in their virtues, but those virtues are almost always present. I have always believed that romance novels portray women in a very positive light, and I have often felt empowered by them. Because of this, many readers do not understand why people are so critical of the genre, not to mention charging them as anti-feminist. The interviewer of Kay Mussell’s 1997 interview, “Are Feminism and Romance Novels Mutually Exclusive?” also puzzles over this notion when she recalls Mussell’s initial unfavorable attitude toward romance novels. She probes Mussell on this point, noting, “nearly all the romances I’ve read have female protagonists who, if not to start, are strong and intelligent women at the end. They may use other wiles in addition to their brains to achieve their ends, but these are not wallflowers or dummies or doormats.”

8.4 Historical Accuracy

An equal to proper depiction of the heroine in the effort to legitimize is the need for the historical author to be accurate. As I have already mentioned, I read historical romance novels almost exclusively. Writers and readers of historicals demand accuracy. Many websites generate historical tip sheets to help the writers maintain accuracy and the readers to get an understanding of the time period. *AAR* itself has a page dedicated to historical research. Many historical eras have detailed information that readers and writers would find helpful. There is even a link that invites you to “ask a historian.” Writers will usually discuss the amount of research that they put into writing a novel. They want readers and non-readers to know that these books are respectable and have historical integrity. In fact, most women claim that the fact that the books are historical validates the books themselves and their reading of them. In fact, Radway claimed that this aspect of romance novels was a way for the women of her study to gain their temporary agency. These women could instruct their family members about the time period they visited in their books. They were learning useful information. They were not just reading trash. Radway writes:

I think it likely that the ‘reading for instruction’ explanation is a secondary justification for repetitive romance consumption that has been articulated by the women to convince skeptical husbands, friends, and interviewers that the novels are not merely frothy, purposeless entertainment but possess a certain intrinsic value that can be transferred to the reader. (107)

Radway is right. The historical accuracy is a point of pride among the readerdom. It is part of the process of legitimization. In relation to this point, I remember reading a particular novel, *Remembrance*, by Jude Deveraux. It is a time travel novel, and the heroine writes autobiographically. Her occupation is a writer of romances. She discusses the reactions to her work and the lack of legitimacy her life's work has, but she herself criticizes authors who write anachronistically. The heroine, Hayden Lane, writes: "One time I laughed hard at a 'medieval' book in which the idiot author thought the garderobe was a closet. Readers know that it was the toilet, but this dumb author kept having people sitting on the floor and discussing things" (37). Deveraux, through her heroine, makes her point. Romance novels are serious undertakings. They are researched painstakingly. Make no mistake.

Many of the books do have caveats in the introductory pages. Since they are romantic fiction, the author will sometimes make note that some aspects of the history have been altered for a better story. They usually beg the readers' pardon for any inaccuracies, but assure them that they were intentional. They almost always take dramatic license because many of the books take up where history books leave off. Though we do not know exactly what Henry VIII said at the Field of the Cloth of Gold, we can imagine. These books take us there. Another thing that romance novelists do admit is that they knowingly romanticize history. Though we all know that most of the medieval lords and ladies were quite earthy, romance novelists rarely focus on that aspect of things. They provide you with a sense of it, but somehow the hero and heroine are unusually sanitary. I think that they know the modern readers' sensibilities.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

As I have said, the romance genre generates many debates within and without its community. The question of whether or not these novels should be classified as some type of popular art is not one that will be easily answered. The romance novel is emotionally charged in the minds of many feminists and other academics, and thus will always be considered subversive to women, and well, just not very good writing—certainly not art. Providing it with legitimacy will be a difficult fight, but it appears to be one well worth fighting for its writers and readerdom. The fact that Westerns do not seem to have to deal with the stigmas that the romance does seem to be connected, in my mind, to the issue of gender. The fact that the Western's conventions include misogynistic attitudes seemingly does not spark the same criticism that romance conventions do. Instead, critics charge romances with portraying women as submissive perpetrators of patriarchy (among other things). Romances and Westerns share a lack of legitimacy due to the fact that they are popular, genre fiction, but their reasons for being classified as low art vary vastly.

As I have shown, gender is a source of rupture in the Western. The dividing line between men and women is sharply delineated. The association between language and women positions women outside of the realm of the heroic. Women, in the Western,

remain peripheral. Homosocial bonds are prized over any other—heterosexual unions are merely incidental. Men prove themselves, not to women, but to other men. On the other hand, the romance relies as much on the hero as it does the heroine to succeed. The romance is about a heterosexual union, but the focus is on the growth of the emotional bond between them. I think that the romance portrays positive interactions between men and women. Contrary to what some feminists have argued, I do not believe that romances are fantasies of revenge against men. I think romance novelist Laura Kinsale offers an interesting assertion when she writes about why the male character is as important as the female in romance novels. She writes: “It is fairly obvious that the bottom line is sexual admiration: to me, a large part of it feels like a simple, erotic, and free-hearted female joy in the very existence of desirable maleness. Hey, women *like* men” (Krentz 37). The Western, on the other hand, is a particular type of male fantasy that is just about men. The primary question that remains for me now is not, as it was when I began writing this paper: Why do women want to read romance novels? A question for me now might be: Why does a genre that offers positive portrayals of male and female unions receive such derision and scrutiny while a genre that offers a primarily monastic, and often misogynist, male fantasy move with comparable ease toward legitimization? Also, considering that the Western’s popularity is in relative decline compared to the booming romance industry, why is it still more respected? Despite the criticism they garner within and without the academic community, the readers of Western romances and Westerns seemingly expect and appreciate certain conventions in their books that create specific types of gender-

specific fantasies, and to the delight of their readers, myself included, the writers usually deliver.

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